

“GOATS AND MONKEYS!”: SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

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As he stands outside Brabantio’s house in the dead of night, while all is yet quiet and Othello’s marriage to Desdemona still a secret, Iago tells Roderigo that he hates the Moor his commander. He is indifferent to duty, he says, and follows Othello only to serve his own “peculiar end.” Iago boasts of his treacherousness, summarizing his duplicity with the line, “I am not what I am” (1.1.41-65). If Roderigo were a little smarter, he might take this assertion as a warning, a sign that Iago is not to be trusted. To the audience the statement is decidedly unsettling. It is one thing for a man to claim he is not what he *seems*; it is another thing entirely for him to claim he is not what he *is*. The paradoxical character of the line exerts a certain philosophical pressure on us. The significance of “I am not what I am,” like “To be or not to be,” seems to extend beyond its particular context. It seems to be about something more than just the duplicity of this one character. In this essay I am going to argue that we can read Iago’s “I am not what I am” as a succinct Shakespearean account of human nature. Further, I am going to suggest that this Shakespearean account of our nature anticipates the account of human nature we find in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

In *Leviathan*, at the very beginning of his discussion of the Commonwealth, Hobbes claims that the “final cause, end, or design” of humankind is the creation of the social contract, thereby escaping the state of nature, which he characterizes as

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

that miserable condition of war which is necessarily consequent [...] to the *natural* passions of men, when there is no visible power to keep them in awe and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants and observation of those laws of *nature* set down in the [previous] chapters.¹

Here Hobbes argues that our *natural* passions incline us towards liberty, power, and consequently "that miserable condition of war." He goes on to say that it is only through the creation of a sovereign whose authority is enforced that we can make human beings obey the *laws of nature* and create an ordered society. Strangely then, it is our natural passions that cause us to disobey the laws of nature. And so we might say, according to Hobbes, that human nature causes us to do unnatural things. As if recognizing the ambiguity of this position, Hobbes restates it immediately in a slightly condensed form:

For the laws of nature (as *justice, equity, modesty, mercy*, and in sum, *doing to others as we would be done to*) of themselves, without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like.²

On one level this argument does not seem particularly revolutionary. Certainly a vision of human nature "divided against itself" is common enough in the early modern period.³

Built into the Postlapsarian logic of Christianity is a conception that our rational part is perpetually at war with our passionate part. But this is not Hobbes' argument. In

Leviathan Hobbes actually collapses the binary division between passion and reason:

"For the thoughts are to the desires as scouts and spies to range abroad and find the way

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. A. P. Martinich (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 125. Emphasis added.

² Ibid.

³ Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 12-13.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

to the things desired."⁴ In Hobbes' account there is no tension between reason and passion. Reason is something like Appetite's sidekick: both of them involved in the same enterprise – survival and felicity – fighting against the same enemies – death and pain.

What Hobbes seems to be saying, then, is not what Aristotle or Aquinas might say – that our soul is constantly at war with itself; rather what Hobbes describes in *Leviathan* is how precisely a human can become a wholly different kind of being dependent on context. He is trying to track not just an attitudinal shift – a change in habit – but a quasi-ontological transformation from one kind of being into another. For Hobbes we have the capacity to be something other than what we are by nature.⁵ Iago's "I am not what I am," understood in the context of *Othello*'s dramatization of one man's slip from civility to savagery, gestures towards this Hobbesian position: our human capacity to be not what we are.

This capacity to act against our nature is at the very core of Hobbes' political philosophy. For Hobbes, humans, prior to the formation of political community, are violent, selfish, greedy, jealous, and predatory. But according to Hobbes we are also able to escape this state of nature. Through politics we are able to leave behind our natural state and become another kind of being, a civil, cooperative, much nicer being. We achieve this state when we adhere to the laws of nature and thus, confusingly, this state also seems to be, in some sense, a natural state. Our "fear of death" and our "desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living" incline us to peace and so our

⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 57.

⁵ Quentin Skinner describes this in a similar fashion, claiming that Hobbes draws a distinction "between two different worlds that we simultaneously inhabit, one of which is described as the world of nature and the other as the world of artifice." *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 126.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

“reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace upon which men may be drawn to agreement.”⁶

As I will demonstrate in this essay our human capacity to oscillate between different ontological states is one of the central preoccupations of *King Lear* and *Othello*. In each play Shakespeare dismantles what he considers erroneous accounts of human nature, both traditional and emergent, in order to advance an account of our nature this is premised on human liberty, which the playwright depicts as a capacity to act against nature. *King Lear* and *Othello* illustrate how the absence of political restraints allows characters to slip from a civilized state, what we might call ‘the state of natural law,’ into an environment defined by fear, violent competition, and jealousy, a state much like Hobbes’ imagined state of nature. The plays therefore demonstrate the precariousness of the received ‘natural’ order, particularly the ease with which it can be dissolved; simultaneously they grope towards a new, more stable foundation for political community.

Before proceeding it is probably necessary to explain what virtue there is in reading Shakespeare through a Hobbesian lens. My contention is that by demonstrating how Shakespeare explores *dramatically* the same political dynamics that Hobbes would later analyze *philosophically* we gain a clearer understanding of Shakespeare’s account of human nature and his particular understanding of early modern statehood. Perhaps more importantly, by drawing connections between Shakespeare and Hobbes we can better understand the cultural climate that preceded Hobbes, the intellectual background that makes his philosophy possible. While Robin Headlam Wells urges us to “be wary of attributing to [Shakespeare] political theories that were not to emerge for another half a

⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 97.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

century,"⁷ I am suggesting that we can see in Shakespearean drama the ideological groundwork which necessarily preceded the development of important philosophical concepts like the social contract. In this sense I am adapting a strategy employed by Valerie Traub whose exploration of cartographic and anatomical imagery in *King Lear* allowed her "to chart a genealogy of some of our culture's key concepts."⁸ In this essay I am trying to situate Shakespeare within the western tradition of social contract theory. After examining two of playwright's major tragedies it will become clear that Shakespeare, like many of his contemporaries, was interrogating the very foundations of early modern political community, and that interrogation was premised on a revolutionary account of human nature.⁹

That Shakespeare was a serious political thinker has been widely acknowledged.¹⁰ Various critics have also focused on the playwright's engagement with particular political philosophers.¹¹ However, research into the Hobbesian character of Shakespeare's political thought is sparse. Sustained analyses such as Eric Heinze's essay, which claims that Shakespeare's first tetralogy is an essentially Hobbesian exploration of the relationship between brute force and the rule of law, are atypical. Even the recent volume of essays, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, which adapts the

⁷ Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Politics* (London: Continuum, 2009), 17.

⁸ Valerie Traub, "The Nature of Norms in Early Modern England: Anatomy, Cartography, *King Lear*," *South Central Review* 26, nos. 1 & 2 (2009): 45.

⁹ For contemporary debates about the nature of nature in early modern England see John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949); Peter R. Moore, "The Nature of 'King Lear'." *English Studies* 87, no. 2 (2006): 169-90; Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Politics* (London: Continuum, 2009).

¹⁰ See Alexander Leggat, *Shakespeare's Political Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1988); John Alvis and Thomas G. West, eds. *Shakespeare as Political Thinker* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1981); Alan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, eds. *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1964); Derek Cohen, *The Politics of Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

¹¹ See Barbara L. Parker, *Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004); John Roe, *Shakespeare and Machiavelli* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

frontispiece of *Leviathan* for its cover, turns out to be a tease. The collection of 13 essays features only three references to Hobbes – two passing, one parenthetical. Those studies that do explore the intellectual kinship between Shakespeare and Hobbes are older and tend to focus on *King Lear*. For example, William R. Elton periodically referenced Hobbes throughout his study, *King Lear and the Gods*, and James Black once argued that Nahum Tate's famed adaptation of *King Lear* was written with Hobbes in mind.¹² Similarly, the most thorough exploration of Shakespeare's Hobbesian representations is *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear*, written in 1949 by John F. Danby. Danby argues that through its depiction of Edmond, Regan and Goneril, *King Lear* examines the Hobbesian account of human nature, which is contrasted with the more orthodox Christian humanist account in the play represented by Lear, Gloucester, Edgar, and Cordelia:

We have maintained that Hobbes is Edmund's philosopher. Hobbes's world of the 1640's is only different from the world of the 1600's in being a slightly more developed form of the same thing... Hobbes took over Edmund and made him his basic pattern.¹³

Several recent critical studies have echoed elements of Danby's argument, and I will likewise be building upon it here.¹⁴ Over the course of this essay I intend to demonstrate not only that Shakespeare's intellectual affinity with Hobbes extends beyond *King Lear*, but also that Shakespeare's representations of human nature and political community

¹² According to Black, however, though Tate intended to bring what he saw as the play's Hobbesian elements to light, it does not seem that Tate understood Hobbes particularly well. "The Influence of Hobbes on Nahum Tate's *King Lear*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 7, no. 3 (1967): 379.

¹³ Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, 46-7.

¹⁴ See Traub "The Nature of Norms in Early Modern England," 45, and Moore, "The Nature of 'King Lear'," 170.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

anticipate Hobbes' philosophy, particularly this peculiar notion of our ontological flexibility and its political consequences.

The Nature Problem

What is the nature of nature's power with respect to humans? That is the question that *King Lear* insists on asking us over and over again, as we watch Edmond betray the father who loved him, and Cordelia risk all for the father who banished her. In what sense does nature govern human conduct? Or, as Lear asks in the Folio after being cast out in the storm: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (3.6.32-3). Finding a satisfactory answer to these questions proves nearly as difficult for the audience as it does for Lear, especially because nature is, as Jacob Klein says, "multidimensional."¹⁵

First, in both the world and the play, there is widespread disagreement about which behaviours, attitudes, relationships, and institutions we can call natural. Second, it is unclear, even after we have identified the natural things, in what sense we are compelled to love, obey, pursue, foster, or respect those things. Monogamy is a good example. An exclusive sexual partnership between two people might be described variously as natural and unnatural. Those who believe monogamy is a mutually beneficial and therefore rational relationship, the very foundation of family and community, are inclined to think of sexual exclusivity as natural. Those who disagree consider monogamy merely a customary arrangement, often oppressive and contrary to humanity's natural impulses – particularly the male's desire to procreate as often as possible with as many partners as possible. Thus both proponents and opponents of

¹⁵ Jacob Klein, "On the Nature of Nature," *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979): 108.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

monogamy can invoke nature to defend their positions. The reason for this is that each constituency is relying on a different definition of nature to make its case. The contest between these two definitions of nature, a source of both interest and anxiety in the early modern period, is among the major preoccupations of *King Lear*.

For instance, I have not chosen this monogamy example arbitrarily. I mention it here because it is the example Shakespeare uses at the beginning of the play. Before the King has split his kingdom in two, before Kent and Cordelia have been banished, before Lear has even entered the room, we are introduced to the product of a monogamy crisis named Edmond. As Gloucester tells Kent, in excruciating detail, how Edmond "came something saucily into the world before he was sent for" he explains that he has another son "by order of law, some year elder than this" (1.1.17-21). When we consider too Edgar's pitiless pronouncement on the justice of his father's suffering near the end of the play, "The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes" (5.3.162-3), it seems clear that Edmond is not just a child born out of wedlock, but more specifically the product of adultery. Edmond's bastardy thus signals the play's preoccupation with competing definitions of nature. We are prompted to consider whether Edmond is a product of Gloucester's natural impulses or his unnatural impulses? Edmond is among the very first characters we meet because he is a figuration of a debate about human nature with which the play is particularly concerned, the same debate that raged throughout the early modern period as traditional notions of a divinely ordered universe were threatened by the empirical observations of the new science.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

Nature, in its traditional sense, was "a rational arrangement" and "an ideal pattern" set down by God.¹⁶ All created things were called to conform to this pattern, and humans in particular rejected conformity at their peril. The laws of nature were discernible by reason, and they provided the foundations for human law and government. When characters such as Lear and Gloucester talk about nature, this is the nature they are talking about: a divine rule that applies uniformly to "physics, meteorology, botany, zoology, sociology, and ethics."¹⁷ This is the nature of the Great Chain of Being, the chain that "stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects,"¹⁸ a network of "interlocking hierarchies"¹⁹ that dictated humanity's place in the cosmos, as well as each human's standing relative to every other human.

In *King Lear* this traditional sense of nature is contested by an emergent, atheistic understanding of nature. In this alternative account humans are motivated by instinctual drives to survive, copulate, and dominate. This is the account of nature championed by Edmond, Goneril, and Regan. It is the nature of the state of nature, and it challenges the claims to inevitability made by certain human institutions. Humans in this account are no different than weather phenomena or trees, more complicated perhaps, but not categorically different. This is "[t]he idea of nature as a self-running machine, set going by an absentee deity, capable of being measured and investigated – the nature, in other words, of science."²⁰ It is an empirical account of our nature based on observation of the human animal. And importantly, in this account, nature is not the law's foundation, but

¹⁶ Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, 23-4.

¹⁷ Moore, "The Nature of *King Lear*," 169.

¹⁸ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1958), 23.

¹⁹ Georgia Brown, "Defining Nature through Monstrosity in *Othello* and *Macbeth*," *Early Modern Ecocriticism*, ed. Thomas Hallock, Ivo Kamps, and Karen L. Raber (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 70.

²⁰ Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, 36

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

rather its object. The purpose of law is to restrain our natural impulses, which are necessarily contrary to the orderly functioning of peaceful society.²¹

King Lear juggles both of these accounts. The result is a murky, muddled depiction of human nature, one that has prompted Traub to conclude that "because nature in *King Lear* paradoxically is a reflection of the divinely sanctioned hierarchical, patriarchal social order; and an instinctual repulsion from it, it is impossible to settle on its ultimate meaning."²² I am not quite so pessimistic, though I agree that the play's representation of nature is exceptionally complex. Achieving clarity is particularly difficult because in addition to these two competing definitions of nature the play also calls into question the scope of nature's authority – the nature of nature's power with respect to humans. Shakespeare is not only interested in these differing accounts, but also in the problematic status of the *unnatural*, the category with which any account of nature must come to terms.

On some level, nature must be non-negotiable. That is what defines nature as a concept, and what differentiates it from custom, tradition, inclination, and statistical probability. But how then do we account for those instances where nature's authority lapses? This is the question *Lear* confronts throughout the play: first he is desperate to understand "the cause" of his elder daughters' "hard hearts," and later, once he is convinced of the essentially self-centred nature of humanity, he cannot understand how

²¹ William R. Elton describes an earlier and related version of this argument that took place between philosophers and theologians in the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. The earlier question was about whether human affairs were governed by God's providence or by an indifferent and amoral force like fortune (9-33). Elton even identifies the second camp with Hobbes (29). *"King Lear" and the Gods*, (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1966).

²² Traub, "Nature of Norms," 62. Speaking more generally, Georgia Brown argues similarly that "the natural and the unnatural, ultimately escape definition and complete articulation" in early modern England (56).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

Cordelia, who does have "some cause" to hate her father, is able to forgive him (4.6.68). However, by grappling with the existence of the unnatural Shakespeare is able to articulate a coherent, if complex, account of our nature.

Within the traditional Christian humanist paradigm, unnatural human behaviour was understood to be a consequence of our Postlapsarian condition. Proponents of the Great Chain of Being acknowledged "the unique capacity of human beings to sink below type" and descend to the level of animals.²³ Consequent to the fall, human beings were thought to be plagued by contradictory impulses towards the divine and the bodily, the intellectual and the sensual. This argument was rooted in a conception of the tri-partite Aristotelian soul.²⁴ The fundamental problem that Shakespeare perceives in this account is that the 'unnatural' is, in fact, quite typical, perhaps even more common than the natural. On some level nature is supposed to be non-negotiable, but the Great Chain of Being proves frighteningly easy to break. For instance, in *King Lear*, and *Othello* too, this traditional account of nature is threatened, as the received natural order, supposedly buttressed by God and the universe, is dismantled as easily as a young girl says 'no' to her father. Shakespeare thus exposes the folly of trying to base a political community on such a fragile foundation.

²³ Bruce Boehrer, *Shakespeare Among the Animals: Nature and Society in the Drama of Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 27-8. According to Boehrer this is one of three conventional theories about the relationship between humans and animals operating in the early modern period. Other theories drew clearer distinctions between people and beasts. Boehrer also makes it clear, however, that these three theories coexisted (if somewhat uncomfortably) and were deployed variously depending on circumstances. Erica Fudge has thoughtfully outlined numerous instances of animal behaviour that troubled these categorical distinctions. She recounts early modern debates about a dog's ability to use syllogisms, for example (101-4).

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1102a 5-1103a 10.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

In place of this account another emerges, one that incorporates the empirical reality of human selfishness and cruelty.²⁵ This emergent account anticipates Hobbes insofar as it acknowledges that “neither the rational content of the law of nature as a way to peace nor the belief in it as the command of God suffices to establish its status and obligatory force as actual law.”²⁶ In *King Lear* Edmond is the prime example of a character who subscribes to the idea that we are no different from animals, that we prioritize self-preservation and bodily satisfaction over all else, and are essentially governed by instinctual processes beyond our control. Edmond has made a “goddess” of this emergent nature (1.2.1). Consequently, he is completely self-interested. Morality and religion have no hold over him. However, though Shakespeare clearly supplies Edmond with several intelligent arguments, he remains a villain – a traitor, a usurper, and an unfaithful lover – and so we cannot align Shakespeare completely with Gloucester’s bastard son. Shakespeare will not go so far as to argue that we are governed by “[m]echanical necessity.”²⁷ He perceives in human beings a capacity to resist their instinctual natures, just as he recognized the capacity to deviate from the divinely ordained natural order. Edmond’s deathbed declaration, “Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature,” illustrates this awareness (5.3.271-18). Shakespeare recognizes in our innate desire for security and felicity the simultaneous presence of communal and anti-social drives, and so anticipates the tension in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*

²⁵ It is important to reiterate that there is no contest in this account between our rational state and our passionate state. The dualism that the Greeks and Christians saw in our nature does not exist in Hobbes because the tripartite soul is collapsed in his account. Humans are as rational in the state of nature as they are in the state of natural law; it is simply that the wildly different contexts change the standard of rational behaviour.

²⁶ Zagorin, Perez, *Hobbes and the Law of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 52.

²⁷ Danby, *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature*, 25.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

between our natural passions and natural law. What we are left with in *King Lear* is a depiction of human nature that emphasizes our innate liberty, our ability to both deny the natural order and resist our natural instincts, our capacity to be something other than what we are by nature.

The clearest indication of this Shakespearean account comes as Lear stands on the threshold between the political world and the wilderness. Decrying what he calls the 'unnatural' behavior of his daughters and refusing to give up his one hundred knights, the king gives us an account of our nature premised on our essential liberty. In response to Goneril and Regan's demand that he justify his need for such a large retinue, the king argues that to request such a justification is to fundamentally misunderstand what it means to be human:

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady.
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou, gorgeous, wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. (2.2.430-36)

Here Lear claims that unlike other natural beings, we are not governed entirely by necessity. If we were, our clothes would be totally functional, not beautiful.²⁸ The human tendency to wear unnecessary things – diamond rings, bowties, polka dots – marks the difference between humans and animals. As Cantor writes,

²⁸ Danby discusses this speech at some length, though I believe he misinterprets it as an indictment of Goneril's opulent attire (29-31).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

If human beings actually behaved according to a strict standard of necessity, they would choose their clothing solely on the basis of utility, wearing simpler garments that would fulfill better the basic function of shielding the human body from the hostile elements.²⁹

Hobbes makes a related point about the origins of political community. For Hobbes the state is based on covenant. Covenants are the means by which we transcend our natural state and they are a uniquely human invention. According to Hobbes to "make covenants with brute beasts is impossible" as is making a covenant with God, except by "revelation supernatural."³⁰ Moreover, Hobbes also claims that while "certain living creatures, as bees and ants, live sociably one with another," these animal communities do not have the same character as human communities precisely because "the agreement of these creatures is natural." The implication here being that humans can become something other than what they are by nature; they "strive to reform and innovate" in a way that beasts cannot.³¹

What Lear reveals with his clothing example (somewhat unwittingly) is that we have a kind of liberty that is atypical amongst living beings. The thing that differentiates humans from other types of beings is that nature does not have authoritarian control over us. We have a kind of essential liberty from necessity that makes us unique. This liberty allows Edmond to betray his father and Kent to risk his life for the master who banished him. We have a capacity to be something other than what we are by nature, and this capacity, as Shakespeare will illustrate, has profound political consequences. Our innate

²⁹ Paul A. Cantor, "The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in *King Lear*," *"King Lear": New Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Kahan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 247.

³⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 104.

³¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 127-8.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

liberty allows us to create political community out of chaos and to dismantle political community with relative regularity. According to Camille Wells Slight, a new conception of individual identity emerged in the sixteenth century, which supplanted the "older political concept, in which social communities were taken as givens, with a new concept of political atomism, in which the basic social unit is the individual, whose membership in community must be created."³² This conception of political community as a manufactured thing (as opposed to a divinely ordained thing), a system produced collectively by a mass of autonomous individuals is clearly on display in *King Lear*.

Towards a Secular Political Science in *King Lear*

In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes contends that we are born as a species with rights limited only by our capacities. Our foremost right is the right to preserve our lives insofar as we are able, using whatever means are at our disposal. It follows then that we have a right to seize or secure anything that we believe will be conducive to our own preservation and our good. Thus, humanity's primal condition is one in which "every man has a right to every thing, even to one another's body."³³ As a consequence of this radical individual liberty we are all understandably endangered by our fellow humans' pursuit of security and felicity. Our situation is especially precarious because of the general equality that Hobbes sees between all people. As far as humans go, he claims, "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by

³² Camille Wells Slight, "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1997): 378.

³³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 98.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself."³⁴ Since we are all imperiled by the liberty of our fellow human beings, the logical move is to enter into a contract with them, agreeing not to do to them what one would not have done to himself or herself – “*to seek peace and follow it.*”³⁵ After that, we need to establish something that can guarantee our mutual adherence to this agreement, a sovereign power that will ensure everyone’s good behaviour. This is the social contract, and it guarantees the conditions most conducive to safety and contentment; within it human beings are able to pursue the objects of their desire free (or relatively free) of the fear of violent death.

The great concern for Hobbes, of course, is that at any moment we can slip back into a pre-political state, the state of nature, in which our anti-social impulses are given free reign as our self-centred drive for security and felicity pits us against our fellow human beings. Such a slip can occur whenever there is a crisis in the sovereignty of the state, such as during a civil war or any other period of political upheaval, something like the succession crisis with which *King Lear* begins.

Importantly, Lear’s false confidence in his succession plan, like his false confidence in the outcome of his love game, is based on a rigid and decidedly un-Hobbesian understanding of the relationship between human nature and political community. He is confident that “the political order is rooted in the natural, that nature supports human justice and in particular his own decrees as king.”³⁶ Specifically, his political strategy is premised on the notion that his daughters are *naturally* obedient to him. Lear believes his daughters’ devotion is akin to the rising and setting of the sun: it is a law of nature that his children are compelled to obey. This understanding of the nature

³⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 93.

³⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 99.

³⁶ Paul A. Cantor, “The Cause of Thunder,” 231.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

of fidelity leads him to believe he can somehow "retain / The name and all th' addition to a king" while simultaneously handing all responsibility over to his children and their husbands (1.1.133-4). Lear has a naïve faith in the permanence and immutability of what he considers natural: namely monarchical institutions, Judeo-Christian values, and the patriarchal family.³⁷ The rest of the play is essentially a prolonged demonstration of how wrong Lear actually is.

After Lear angrily divides his country in half at the end of the first scene, Hobbes could have easily predicted what comes next. In *Leviathan* he warns that a division of sovereignty "must needs divide that power which (if men will live in peace) is indivisible, and thereby reduce the multitude into the condition of war, contrary to the end for which all sovereignty is instituted."³⁸ The play progresses as a kind of Hobbesian nightmare as the sovereignty crisis created by Lear's abdication thrusts the kingdom into a war "of every man against every man."³⁹ Children betray their fathers. Brothers turn on brothers, and sisters murder sisters.⁴⁰ Confronted by the empirical reality of overwhelming human cruelty, Lear is forced to abandon his prior understanding of what natural human conduct is. When he meets Poor Tom in the storm, he adopts a new position, claiming that, "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.95-6). However, Lear is mistaken yet again. In his new account we are nothing more than nature's slaves. While he has adjusted his definition of nature to

³⁷ In a useful essay on service and slavery in *Othello* Michael Neill suggests that any form of disobedience to an established authority was understood as an instance in a great pattern of rebellion and betrayal typified most notably by Lucifer and Judas. "'His master's ass': Slavery, Service and Subordination in *Othello*," *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, eds. Tom Clayton, Susan Brock and Vincente Forés, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 223.

³⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 140.

³⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 95.

⁴⁰ Danby argues that having two wicked daughters is necessary to illustrate the imperatives of fear and competition, which are essential features of the Hobbesian account (39-42).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

accord with empirical evidence, he still ascribes to nature more authority than Shakespeare seems to believe it has.

One of the major questions the play considers is whether or not there is a natural juridical form, whether or not nature's jurisdiction extends to the political realm. When Edmond wonders aloud why being "some twelve or fourteen moonshines / Lag of a brother" (1.2.5-6) should make him deficient in the eyes of the state, he levels a powerful criticism against the custom-based world of Lear's kingdom. Modern audiences are especially receptive to his argument because we have been conditioned to believe in the innate wrongness of discrimination on biological grounds. Edmond's early arguments, supported by the absurdity of the succession crisis in the first scene – a necessary product of a patrilineal monarchy – undermine the monarchical world order that Lear cherishes. However, the state that replaces the old world order, the state that Edmond helps bring about, is obviously horrible: "In the absence of any notion of justice and law, society becomes bestial and self-destructive and thus no longer *human* society at all."⁴¹ As Hobbes says of the state of nature, "The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place."⁴² Thus with the abolition of convention on the grounds that it is somehow unnatural, a new state of being is revealed that is far more inhuman, necessitating a return through violence to a state of being more like that at the play's beginning.⁴³ The play therefore rejects both a rigidly hierarchical account of human nature and a strictly bestial account. Essentially the play is groping for a new foundation for political community, one that is more stable than the traditional conceptions of naturalized monarchy and patriarchy with which the play opens. By revealing first the

⁴¹ Cantor "The Cause of Thunder," 234.

⁴² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 97.

⁴³ Cantor describes this as a transition from convention to nature and back to convention (244-6).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE OF NATURE

illusory quality of traditional accounts of nature, and then the horrifying character of humanity's apolitical condition, Shakespeare argues that, yes, political community is desirable, but it is only stable if based on an account of our nature that recognizes our essential liberty from natural necessity.

What Shakespeare demonstrates in *King Lear* is that the state of nature and its opposite, the state of natural law, exist in a dynamic relationship to each other. The qualities associated with the state of natural law – justice, mercy, charity, and kindness – the qualities Lear and Gloucester prize so highly are, in fact, desirable, but they are also conditional. We always have the capacity to deny natural law just as we have the capacity to resist our natural passions, to become something other than what we are by nature. Shakespeare further contends that the shape and structure of political community is not imposed on us by divine or universal edict, by God or the Great Chain of Being. Rather, politics is presented here as something that must be decided upon and maintained.⁴⁴

Following this Hobbesian reading, it seems significant that in the opening scene, Cordelia, the most admirable character in the play, articulates her love for her father as a kind of contract: "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" (1.1.94-6). The affectionate relationship between father and daughter, much like that between king and subject is here represented not as inevitable but as an act of will. Cordelia acknowledges that her life and love are made possible by Lear's care for her; the relationship is thus defined reciprocally. It is worth noting too that Cordelia takes issue with her sisters' speeches precisely because their hyperbolic rhetoric violates the contracts they have made with

⁴⁴ Nor is the depiction in *King Lear* unique; Headlam Wells argues that the "social world" of Shakespearean drama is always "a fragile order where anarchy is an ever-present possibility," 4.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

their husbands: "Why have my sisters husbands if / They say they love you all?" (1.1.97-8). For Cordelia the tenor of her sisters' proclamations reveals only how careless Goneril and Regan are with covenants.⁴⁵

In her work *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*, Erica Fudge reminds us that reason, the defining characteristic of human beings according to most early moderns, is not something with which people are born. Rather, reason is an *acquired* trait. In her words "reason cannot be displayed until something that is not natural but cultural has taken place."⁴⁶ This is a position that Hobbes holds as well: "By this it appears that reason is not, as sense and memory, born with us, nor gotten by experience only, as prudence is, but attained by industry[.]"⁴⁷ In *King Lear*, Shakespeare makes a similar case for the conditional quality of civilized human behaviour. As a species we do not obey the laws of nature until something cultural has taken place: until we are secured by the state. Without that security we become something else; we enter into the state of nature, which seems paradoxically *inhuman*. Therefore, though A. G. Harmon asserts that "the understanding of the law's philosophical underpinnings" in early modern England "was basically that of Thomas Aquinas,"⁴⁸ we can perceive in Shakespeare a shift towards another grounding for political community, one that is based on our essential human liberty and the rational need to restrain that liberty for the good of all concerned.

⁴⁵ The play also begins with a broken contract, insofar as it begins with an account of Gloucester's adultery.

⁴⁶ Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning*, 42.

⁴⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 37.

⁴⁸ A. G. Harmon, *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts: Law and Nature in Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 4.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

Contractual Humanity in *Othello*

Othello is a play about contracts. At its center is the marriage contract between Othello and Desdemona, an agreement that is threatened by indignant fathers, would-be adulterers, and sociopathic ensigns. The play's emphasis on contract is displayed near its beginning. As Desdemona breaks the news of her elopement to her father, she sounds remarkably like Cordelia contractually professing her love for Lear:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you: you are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.179-88)

What Cordelia speaks of hypothetically – dividing her loyalties between father and husband – has become a reality for Desdemona. Informed by what Mark Matheson calls the “liberal institutions” of republican Venice, Desdemona articulates her status as Brabantio’s daughter as “a relationship of power in which the daughter is the father’s possession as guaranteed by a specific set of cultural arrangements.”⁴⁹ Like Cordelia,

⁴⁹ Mark Matheson, “Venetian Culture and the Politics of *Othello*,” *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 172-3.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

Desdemona understands her relationship to her father as something deliberate, not something inevitable. Interestingly, like Lear, Brabantio views his daughter's disobedience as a deviation from nature; only what Lear calls 'unnatural', Brabantio calls 'supernatural', claiming his daughter has been seduced "By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" (1.3.62).

In this way *Othello*, like *King Lear*, begins its examination of "the parameters of the human."⁵⁰ Both plays begin with a father asserting that naturalness of the Christian humanist paradigm. Here Brabantio insists on patriarchal authority and racial hierarchies, but his arguments come off as impotent bluster. As Hobbes says, "Ignorance of the causes and original constitution of right, equity, law, and justice disposeth a man to make custom and example the rule of his actions[.]"⁵¹ And as in *King Lear* a traditional account of human nature is challenged by an atheistic, animalistic account of our nature. In *Othello* it is Iago who consistently claims that humans (especially women and Moors) are no different from animals driven primarily by instinct. Trying to incense Brabantio against the Moor, Iago memorably cries out, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-9). Iago consistently refers to Desdemona's feminine 'nature' as the thing that will lead her to stray from her husband. He tantalizes Roderigo with fantasies of Desdemona's sexual liberality: "She must change for youth: when she is sated with his body she will find the errors of her choice. She must have change, she must" (1.3.343-5). One of the most memorable images in the play comes in the seduction scene when Othello demands Iago show him proof that his wife is a whore, and Iago responds, "It is impossible you should see this, / Were they as prime as goats, as

⁵⁰ Brown, "Defining Nature through Monstrosity in *Othello* and *Macbeth*," 60.

⁵¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 79.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk" (3.3.404-407). In other words, even if Cassio and Desdemona were as sexually uninhibited as animals, Othello still would not catch them in the act. The image of Desdemona and Cassio rutting like beasts clearly sticks with Othello, as later in the play when he is informed that Cassio will take his place in command of Cyprus "Goats and monkeys!" becomes the Moor's exclamatory epithet (4.1.255).⁵²

Brabantio characterizes the match between Othello and Desdemona as "Against all rules of nature" (1.3.102), and is shocked both by his daughter's willfulness and her atypical romantic preferences. Later in the play Iago tells Roderigo that once Desdemona's "blood is made dull with the act of sport" then "very nature will instruct her" to exchange Othello for another (2.1.221-9). For Brabantio, then, Desdemona's true nature is obedient and chaste, while for Iago it is deceitful and lascivious. However, these opposing theories of nature are challenged not just by each other, but also by the atypical match between Othello and Desdemona, which cannot be explained by either Brabantio's or Iago's position. Their love illustrates the problem of interpreting humans too rigidly as slaves to the natural order, however one conceives of that order. Othello is noble and capable, able to do much more than simply tell stories for Brabantio's entertainment. Desdemona is chaste and faithful. Despite Iago's slanders, and Emilia's morally ambiguous counsel, Desdemona is virtuous; her behaviour is consistently beyond reproach. Thus what Desdemona's relationship with Othello reveals is the key facet of the Shakespearean account of human nature: our ability to transcend the limits that nature supposedly sets for us.

⁵² See Bohrer for a discussion on the animal imagery attached to cuckolds in the period (71-98).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

Othello is a play that focuses especially on the precariousness of civilized human conduct; it places special emphasis on the tenuous hold both Desdemona and Othello have on human status given the prejudicial context in which they live.⁵³ Fudge tells us that in the early modern period “[t]he being called human, by failing to use its rational part, risks losing its humanity. Such failures are almost always figured as a descent to the level of the animal.”⁵⁴ For Shakespeare, however, as for Hobbes, it is politics not reason that secures our civilized humanity.⁵⁵ For Shakespeare civilization is not inevitable but rather contractual. It is the social contract that prevents us from becoming violent and brutish. The reason that the perceived dissolution of the marriage contract in *Othello* causes so much carnage, is that contract both symbolically and actually secures Othello’s place in human community.⁵⁶ Othello’s vow to love Desdemona until doomsday, “when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again” (3.3.91-2), is suggestive of this dynamic. Othello’s human status is something fragile, and conditional, dependant on the contract he has made with Desdemona and the Venetian social contract that secures his position in the community.

Something that is not often emphasized in discussions of *Othello* is that Desdemona and Othello are both victims of false accusations. Othello accuses Desdemona of infidelity, and Brabantio accuses Othello of stealing Desdemona (1.3.61). What I want to suggest is that the reason things turn out differently for Othello than they

⁵³ See Neill for a discussion of how Othello is “insecurely fitted to the received hierarchies by which Shakespeare’s Venetians order their world” (219).

⁵⁴ Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning*, 35.

⁵⁵ Consider that Iago and Edmond are arguably both the most rational and the most savage characters in *Othello* and *King Lear* respectively.

⁵⁶ Harmon examines in some detail the positive version of this representation – familiar to any student of Shakespeare – that the marriage contract regularly symbolizes the social contract; its solemnization at the end of Shakespeare’s comedies serves to reify the community’s legal infrastructure (8-23).

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

do for Desdemona is that Othello is protected by the institutions of Venice and Desdemona is not. In Venice, Othello is given a hearing. Witnesses are called. The state intervenes in a conflict between its citizens. By contrast, in Cyprus, there are fewer legal and political mechanisms to protect Desdemona.

Like *King Lear* then, *Othello* examines the consequences of our transition from the political world, represented here by Venice, to the pre-political world, represented by Cyprus. As Othello and Desdemona leave Venetian civilization for militarized Cyprus, sailing across the sea and through a storm, we move from a community governed by the rule of law and rational debate to a border territory marked by passion, jealousy, and violence. Cyprus had much different associations than did Venice in early modern England. While, for Shakespeare, Venice was the seat of republicanism and trade, Cyprus was a hotspot for feuding between Christian Europeans and the Turk, a war zone of some repute and an outpost, situated at the threshold between east and west.

This reading is supported by a significant image early in the play. When Roderigo and Iago first awake Brabantio by announcing that he has been robbed, Brabantio initially rejects these claims as nonsensical: "What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice: / My house is not a grange" (1.1.105-106). Brabantio asserts that his house is safe from invaders because it is *located within* the city. His house's situation in Venice is significantly contrasted to that of a "grange," a country house, an isolated (and therefore more vulnerable) living space positioned at a distance from the rest of civilization – as Cyprus is situated at a distance from western centres of power.

As in *Lear*, as characters move from the political world into the state of nature, we witness a transformation into a different state of being. Othello is the prime example.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

Consider the changes we see in Othello once the political context is altered. In Venice, Othello is exceptionally dignified. The ease with which Iago poisons his mind in Cyprus is all the more amazing when we consider how calm and restrained Othello is when confronted by an angry mob on the streets of Venice. There he does not threaten or boast, or vow revenge before "yon marble heaven" (3.3.460). He does not call for blood, despite the vitriol and slanderous innuendo that is deployed against him. Instead he volunteers to be taken before the authorities: "Whither will you that I go / To answer this your charge?" (1.2.84-5). It is in Cyprus that Iago is able to work his magic. It is in that context that Othello can be turned into a savage.

In the Shakespearean account, humans have the capacity to oscillate between two different states of being. Othello's transformation from loving husband and respected general into a savage murderer is a clear representation of the slip from civilized to brutish. This slip is facilitated primarily by Iago who convinces Othello of a particular account of human (especially female) nature. The transition from Venice to Cyprus is partially a symbolic one. However, this change in context also plays a substantive role in the plot. When Othello strikes Desdemona in Act 4, Lodovico responds, "My lord, this would not be believed in Venice, / Though I should swear I saw't" (4.1.233-4), suggesting a real difference between the way people behave in the republican city-state and the way they behave in the military outpost. Though Lodovico pleads with Othello to make amends with Desdemona, he does not restrain Othello's wrath as the Venetian senate restrained Brabantio's. While Fudge claims that reason is often identified in the early modern period as the criteria for human status, both Shakespeare and Hobbes emphasize a different threshold: for both, political community, not reason, is the primary

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

border between the state of natural law and the state of nature. And so for both the playwright and the philosopher, what we can call 'natural' human conduct depends largely on context.

Conclusion

The term "slave" recurs a number of times in *Othello*.⁵⁷ Othello, of course, recounts to the Venetian senators how he was "sold to slavery" (1.3.138), but the term "slave" appears most often as an insult. Once Iago has convinced the Moor that Cassio is sleeping with his wife, Othello wishes "that the slave had forty thousand lives" so that he could murder him over and over (3.3.443). Emilia speculates that "Some cogging, cozening slave" has slandered Desdemona, and Iago calls Roderigo a "murd'rous slave," just before murdering him (5.1.61).

Most of these references to slavery happen in close proximity to Iago, and in the play's final scene Iago is called a slave multiple times. Montano calls him a "damnéd slave" after he has killed Emilia (5.2.242); Lodovico calls him the same thing – "damnéd slave" – as he laments Othello's downfall (5.2.290). As Othello mourns for his wife and cries out "O curséd, curséd slave!" (5.2.275), he might be talking about Iago or about himself. There is no ambiguity, however, about the play's final invocation of the term as Iago is taken away to be tortured: "For this slave, / If there be any cunning cruelty / That can torment him much and hold him long, / It shall be his" (5.2.331-4).

In early modern England slavery had specific connotations. It "bore little or no relation to discourses of 'racial' difference in early modern thought," instead it was used

⁵⁷ Wells Slights, "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*," 382-3.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

rather literally to mark the difference "between master and servant, or between bond and free".⁵⁸ Slavery was understood as a fate that could befall almost anyone; it was not considered the natural condition of any particular race or ethnic group. There are relatively few actual slaves in Shakespeare. Caliban, Ariel, and the Dromio brothers are exceptions. Sokol notes that the term slave most commonly appears in Shakespeare, as it does in *Othello*, as an insult, synonymous with "churl, lout, wretch, rogue, reprobate, or knave." The word typically denotes "a person degraded in behaviour or sensibility."⁵⁹ That said, Shakespeare uses the term very deliberately in *Othello*, and it is especially significant that Iago is the character most commonly referred to as a slave. The consistency of the insult reflects an attempt by the various characters in the play to explain Iago's motivations, which are notoriously hard to pin down.⁶⁰ It would be comforting to imagine that Iago is a slave to nature, like an animal, that he does what he does because his will is overcome by fear or desire, but this does not seem to be the case. The problem is that Iago is not characteristically slavish. For instance when we first meet him, he significantly says of Othello, "I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (1.1.42), and "In following him, I follow but myself" (1.1.58). Such lines are indicative of Iago's sense of his own liberty, and Iago is not mistaken. The term "slave" actually proves an inadequate label for Iago, because his villainy is premised on his terrifying autonomy, his freedom from all social and moral constraints. The monstrous thing about Iago is not that he is slavish, but that he is *free*. Consider his response during the seduction scene, when Othello demands to know Iago's thoughts: "Good my lord, pardon me: / Though I am

⁵⁸ Michael Neill, "'His master's ass,'" 217.

⁵⁹ B. J. Sokol, *Shakespeare and Tolerance*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 146.

⁶⁰ See Zender, "The Humiliation of Iago," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 34, no. 2 (1994): 323-4, and Sokol, *Shakespeare and Tolerance*, 147-9.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

bound to every act of duty, / I am not bound to that all slaves are free to" (3.3.137-9).

These lines are crucial because the impenetrability of Iago's interiority (along with the impenetrability of all human interiority) is one of the play's central thematic crises.⁶¹

What Iago reveals in these lines though has great relevance to our examination of the Shakespearean account of human nature because what Iago effectively argues here is that all humans, even slaves, are fundamentally free. The frightening thing about Iago, then, is not how bestial or slavish he is, but how human he is.

There is a related moment in *King Lear* as the old king shouts at the storm and applies the "slave" label to himself: "Here I stand your slave, / A poor infirm, weak and despised old man" (3.2.18-20). Lear makes this claim after Goneril and Regan have cast him out and only shortly before his encounter with Poor Tom when he asserts that "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal" (3.4.95-6). At this point in the play Lear is convinced that humans are nothing but necessity machines, slavishly obedient to their instinctual nature. Thus he proclaims himself a slave to the storm, the play's most prominent figuration of nature. Lear's assessment of human nature is clearly mistaken in this moment for his model for natural man, Edgar, is, in fact, faking it. Edgar is not what he is, or, as he says just before assuming the guise of Poor Tom, "Edgar I nothing am" (2.2.178). Lear's assessment of our slavish, animalistic nature is thus ironic. Just as Goneril, Regan, and Edmond are free to overturn the received order of the universe, so Cordelia, Kent and Edgar are able to transcend the imperatives of the Shakespearean state of nature.

⁶¹ See Joel B. Altman, *The Improbability of "Othello"* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9-18.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

Hobbes identifies liberty as the first right of nature and describes it as "the absence of external impediments."⁶² Both *King Lear* and *Othello* question the degree to which nature imposes limits on human beings. Both plays suggest that our natural autonomy, our essential liberty is the thing that makes us human. In early modern England there was an emergent sense that the "subject no longer locates the self as an inherent part of a meaningfully ordered cosmos." Instead "the basic social unit is the individual, whose membership in community must be created."⁶³ Shakespeare's argument is essentially that the political order needs to account for this human autonomy. In this way his plays evidence a transition from an understanding of politics as divinely ordered to one that understands human community as constructed, a movement in early modern political thought that would later be advanced dramatically by Hobbes'

Leviathan.

⁶² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 98.

⁶³ Wells Slights, "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*," 377-8.

MOORE: "GOATS AND MONKEYS!": SHAKESPEARE, HOBBS, AND THE STATE
OF NATURE

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OF NATURE

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