Human Insufficiency and the Politics of Accommodation in *King Lear*

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Shakespearean scholars interested in political thought perennially return to the middle scenes of *King Lear*, an episode that seems to lay bare truths about sovereignty and subjection by staging their dissolution. A crisis of authority permeates every line of the tragedy; from Lear’s love test to Albany’s failure to establish a successor to the throne, the play frantically searches for an anchor on which to ground the state. But no moment more urgently interrogates these central themes than the scenes on the heath. The king has given away his land yet demands that he retain the royal title. In his fall, he also mirrors the abused bodies of the masterless men to whom he apostrophizes at the start of act 3, scene 4. In examining the problem of authority, scholars home in on the trope of the “unaccommodated man.” A human being stripped of political, social, and familial ties raises questions about sovereignty, natural law, and the effects of social hierarchies. This trope could provide a materialist critique of political structures. Or it might reflect philosophical developments, anticipating seventeenth-century contract theory. *King Lear* engages political thought at a moment of ex-

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traordinary intellectual upheaval by staging key philosophical questions. The unac-
commodated man embodies these debates but fails to present a single answer to
this crisis of authority.

But what would it mean for a human to be “unaccommodated” in the first
place? Could there be such a creature? When King Lear encounters Edgar dis-
guised as Poor Tom, he imagines he sees the essence of humanity in the beggar’s
pitiful body: “thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such
a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.”3 Without protective clothing, the human
is a pathetic sight. His exposed body cannot tolerate the cold air cutting across
the treeless waste. Soft skin fails to provide safeguard from the elements. Instead,
the bare tissue feels the persecutions of each gust as the wind draws heat from the
animal body. Unlike his nonhuman counterparts, “man” is born uncovered and
vulnerable. Lear’s account imagines the natural state of humanity to be solitary
and naked. But we seem ill-suited for such conditions. “Unaccommodated man”
is not an external reality but rather a claim about human nature.

In fact, debates about the sufficiency of humans pervaded sixteenth-century
political philosophy. Writers as diverse as Niccolò Machiavelli, Michel de Mon-
taigne, and Richard Hooker weighed in on the issue. Early modern thinkers asked,
Are humans individually self-sufficient, able to live without the accommodations
of society? Or are we naturally reliant on each other, needing that which we our-
selves cannot provide? These questions are not merely early modern exercises in
the pursuit of origins. Rather, these fundamental assumptions about the human
are inextricable from how one conceives of political structures. If humans could
exist as individuals roaming on the heath, then state structures are artificial agree-
ments and political authority must be created. If humans are insufficient in them-
selves, however, then political bodies are the natural state of humanity and we can
only exist by relying on each other.4 This kind of thinking rejects authority as cen-
tral to our political nature. Thus, Lear’s account of humanity uses the terms of
political philosophy, dramatizing the debate through staged bodies. The bedraggled
king’s iconic words establish the human corpus as the contested site of the polit-
cal imagination. The play represents contrasting perspectives on the natural state
of the human, considering whether we exist primarily as individuals or are mutu-
ally constituted by definition.

By criticizing humans as “unaccommodated,” Lear invokes a discourse of “hu-
man negative exceptionalism,” a vein of thought recently theorized by Laurie
Shannon. It critiques humans as uniquely weak, unequipped to protect ourselves

otherwise noted, all citations to the play refer to this edition.

4. Thomas Hobbes will, of course, upend the terms of this debate in the seventeenth century. Fear-
ing violent death, humans will necessarily consent to incorporation into the Leviathan.
from the elements, and reliant on nonhuman animals to make up for these deficiencies.\(^5\) Pliny and Plutarch provided early modern writers with a discourse of critique in which humans are the poorest, least accommodated of all living creatures. This account of bodily inadequacy, however, has an unexpected discursive life at the end of the sixteenth century, a development that has escaped scholarly attention. Political thinkers such as Richard Hooker, Robert Persons, and Pierre de La Primaudaye use the insufficiency of individual human bodies to make arguments about the basis of our political nature. Like Pliny and Plutarch, they too characterize the human frame as being ill-equipped to protect us either from the elements or from violence, but rather than denigrate the human, they argue that our physical weakness requires the accommodation of other people. Just as infants are incapable of caring for themselves, adult humans rely on political structures. Our physiology binds us to others through material insufficiency. For these thinkers, only a community of people can produce the food, clothing, and shelter necessary for survival. This account of our political nature blends human negative exceptionalism with Aristotle’s claim that the polis ontologically precedes the individual. The philosopher argues that “the polis is prior in order of nature to the family and the individual” because “the whole is necessarily prior [in nature] to the part.”\(^6\) Humans are naturally part of a whole. In contradistinction to nonhuman animals that are individually sufficient unto themselves, we are the “political animal.”\(^7\) Only through political community can humans become self-sufficient. The

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5. Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 127–73. Shannon argues that *King Lear* presents humans as “cosmically unaccommodated,” unfit for the world, and continually making up for this lack (141). We owe debts to worms for their silk, beasts for their hides, sheep for their wool, and cats for their perfume. Enslavement and slaughter of such creatures are a violent strategy to overcome these inherent insufficiencies. My argument reconsiders her careful account of human negative exceptionalism in light of the early modern debates about human insufficiency as foundational to human politics. I depart from Shannon’s reading of *King Lear* as a critique of the human form and suggest that the scenes on the heath test a political paradigm of human vulnerability.


7. Throughout this article, I use the term “nonhuman animal” to identify living creatures that are not humans. Such a term fits well with early modern usage of “beast,” which imagines life as a spectrum of complexity rather than as a binary. The Aristotelian thinking examined in this article defines human politics in contradistinction to nonhumans that do not need political community. *Politics*, however, diverges from *History of Animals* wherein political life is not unique to our species. Bees, e.g., are not political in the former but are so in the latter. See David Depew, “Humans and Other Political Animals in Aristotle’s *History of Animals*,” *Phronesis* 40, no. 2 (1995): 156–81. Of course, ancient and early modern political theorists regularly described ants and bees as political animals. See, e.g., Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. E. M. Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 2.17.6–13. Hobbes argues that whereas bees and ants are naturally incorporated, humans can only create artificial covenants.
vulnerability of the naked human body thus provides a material account of the political animal.

This article reframes the conversation about King Lear and political authority, directing our attention to a more fundamental philosophical preoccupation. The scenes on the heath discard the conventional terms of political thought, leaving behind sovereignty, consent, and coercion. Such categories consider humanity’s organization through imagined individuals wielding power or yielding to it. Instead, human insufficiency understands the political to be an emergent quality, arising from the involuntary behaviors of the human form and creating something that exceeds the sum of these individual acts. The tragedy shows the independent human to be a fiction arising from Lear’s oppressed imagination. In King Lear, our impersonal needs and vulnerabilities come to the fore, staging our political nature through the characters’ frail bodies.

To theorize the political through the needs of weak human bodies fundamentally shifts the conversation about early modern collectivity away from the state. Most recently, political scholarship on King Lear has turned to Giorgio Agamben’s account of “bare life.” These biopolitical perspectives examine act 3’s concern with the effects of sovereign authority. But I return to Aristotle (Agamben’s key interlocutor) to reconsider the influence of the ancient philosopher on King Lear insofar as the play dramatizes an early modern debate over whether humans can live without society. Machiavelli had reignited this dispute by beginning his Discourses on Livy with a description of early humans living independently from each other, without society. Against the Italian, late sixteenth-century Aristotelians established our political nature in the vulnerability of the human body. This vein of thought uses corporeal insufficiency to extend Aristotle’s argument for the mutual constitution of humanity. The second half of this article turns to King Lear, showing that the tragedy dramatizes this debate through Lear’s account of the “unaccommodated man”—the person living without political society. But the independent human proves to be a fantasy. The former king’s physical insufficiency demonstrates that other people are the necessary accommodation of human life. The play advances vulnerability, rather than consent or coercion, as the foundation of politics. By expanding political thinking beyond discrete, conscious acts, King Lear reveals shared life to be an emergent condition arising through an accretion of seemingly apolitical desires and actions.

I. REIMAGINING THE POLITICAL ANIMAL

Giorgio Agamben develops Foucault’s account of biopolitics by returning to Aristotle’s division of natural life (zoe) from political life (bios). Whereas the home supports the natural lives of individuals, the polis works toward the good life. For Agamben, modern politics is founded upon the capture of mere life by sovereign power. Although natural life is excluded from politics, the state nonetheless ex-
presses itself through violence upon human bodies, which is why Agamben argues that “bare life” or “life exposed to death” is “the originary political element.”

State authority derives from human life that has no protections and is at the mercy of unregulated state brutality. Thus, the clear distinction between natural life and political life becomes “a zone of irreducible indistinction.” Agamben theorizes the state as expressed through the concentration camps of the Holocaust. For him, this kind of violence is the foundational logic of the modern state rather than a moral aberration from it. King Lear’s preoccupation with the vulnerability of human bodies seems to fit nicely with Agamben’s philosophy and bare life has recently become a prevailing lens through which to read the tragedy.

This formulation of the political has been productively applied to King Lear by Daniel Gil in Shakespeare’s Anti-politics. Gil argues that Shakespeare’s work presents an argument for an antipolitics by portraying the brutal violence that both monarchical and republican entities enact on subjects. In King Lear, this violence appears in the form of torture, the clearest expression of sovereign power. He argues that “the life of the flesh”—an early modern version of Agamben’s bare life—is the political core of the tragedy. In moments of extreme violence at the hands of sovereign power, characters recognize their shared humanity and suffering. Whereas Gil focuses on Gloucester’s torture and the trial scene, others turn toward the scenes on the heath as the liminal space between natural life and political life. Both Brian Sheerin and Simon Palfrey consider the “unaccommodated man” in light of Agamben’s bare life but from very different political perspectives. Sheerin optimistically reads the scenes on the heath as regenerating sovereignty in a more just form. More in line with Gil’s reading, Palfrey argues that Edgar as Poor Tom is the clearest example of bare life, continually illustrating “the imminent violence of his being.” Unaccommodated man is both a mere body and the result of a brutal political system.

Although I argue that biopolitics is too modern a formulation to fully illuminate the strange articulations of shared life in Lear, I linger on this conversation because these scholars pick up on a key political thread in the play that can begin to be illuminated by working backward from Agamben to his other important interlocutor, Hannah Arendt. In The Human Condition, Arendt claims that early

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8. Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 88. Scholars often conflate bare life with zoe due to Agamben’s inconsistent use of the terms. Whereas the latter is life itself or mere life, bare life is life that is subject to sovereign violence.
10. Gil, Shakespeare’s Anti-politics.
modern readers misinterpreted Aristotle due to Latin translations of “political” as “social,” thereby joining two realms that were entirely different and in opposition to each other in ancient Greek society: zoe and bios.\textsuperscript{13} Any activity that aims to sustain natural life is not part of the political realm because politics must always strive toward the good life and cannot be bound to biological life.\textsuperscript{14} In other words, need has no place in the political. Her call for a return to the public sphere responds to the political crisis of modernity. By returning to Arendt, whose reading of Aristotle was central to Agamben’s project, we can see that the division between mere life and political life was not a central concern during the English Renaissance. In fact, their lack of distinction, beginning with late medieval scholastics and continuing to the modern United States, is the problem that \textit{The Human Condition} seeks to remedy. The early modern writers examined below gloss over this division and instead theorize Aristotle’s assertion that humans are insufficient as individuals and need other people to reach self-sufficiency. They articulate a communitarian politics without authority. Zoe becomes a way to theorize bios.

How does the early modern fascination with natural life provide a logic for political life? Aristotle posits that even though the individual chronologically precedes the polis, the latter is ontologically prior to the former. In this teleological understanding of being, we cannot but exist in political arrangement. He contends that humans mutually constitute one another, even going so far as to compare an individual to a foot or a hand. Cut off from the body, a limb is useless and cannot exist on its own. Mutual dependence defines the human. The philosopher Adriana Cavarero describes the strangeness of Aristotle’s thinking to our own:

“In contrast to what happens in the Aristotelian \textit{koinonia} [polis, community, or shared life], modernity erases the natural bond and thinks of individuals as autonomous, isolated, and competitive. No one means anything to anyone else; each is already complete in the self-sufficiency that enclosed them in themselves, like a world apart.”\textsuperscript{15} But early modern writers were not content with simply asserting

\textsuperscript{13} Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 22–37. Arendt puts much pressure on Aquinas’s rendering of the \textit{zoon politikon} as “animal socialis” in the \textit{Summa Theologica}, explaining in a footnote that “The word ‘politicus’ does not occur in the text” (23). Aquinas does, however, call humans the “animal politicum” earlier in the \textit{Summa} (1a2ae:61,5). Contra Arendt, there seems to be a tension between Aquinas’s use of these categories rather than an erosion of the political. In the early modern period, \textit{zoon politikon} is often rendered into Latin as \textit{animal civile}, a further distinction that remains to be examined in relation to discourses of courtesy and civility.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Julia Reinhard Lupton, \textit{Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Lupton argues that, unlike Agamben, “zoe and bios never become programmatic categories” (8) for Arendt. Her dazzling study examines the liminal space between these Aristotelian categories, which she uses as the subtitle to the book.

that humans are mutually constituted. They were interested in figuring out a material explanation for the claim that the polis is ontologically prior to the individual. We can begin to see this material approach to human insufficiency in the 1598 English translation of Louis Le Roy’s French edition of the Politics. The anonymous translator connects the ideas of the primacy of the polis with the disposition of the human body: “Therefore is it cleere and manifest without all doubt, that a Cittie is by nature and before any one of vs: For if every man seuered and set alone, is not sufficient for himselfe, hee will be so affected toward the whole, namely the Cittie, as other partes that are sundred from their whole. But he that can not abide to liue in companie, or through sufficiencie hath need of nothing, is not esteemed a part or member of a Cittie, but is either a beast or a God.”

The individual’s insufficiency requires the individual to live in the polis. To be human (neither a beast nor a god) means to be fundamentally insufficient unto oneself. That is, each person needs the political, as each person’s very being is constituted through association with other humans. Tellingly, the translator writes that men are “affected toward the whole,” an articulation that suggests a bodily disposition toward political life. Early modern thinkers could not merely consider political association as the human’s final end. They wanted a formal cause for the political—one that could be found in the human frame. The frailty of the body provided writers with a material account of our mutual constitution, something that required humans to live in political society. In contradistinction to the robust bodies of nonhuman animals, we are insufficient.

The formation of human weakness, however, is in part a reaction against Machiavelli’s rendering of a state of nature in his Discourses on Livy, wherein he describes early humans living like beasts, without political society. The next section situates late sixteenth-century accounts of human bodily insufficiency by discussing Machiavelli’s use of primitivism to argue against Aristotle. This debate centers around the human’s political being as either artificial or as an unavoidable product of human insufficiency. That is, can humans live without accommodations like beasts on the heath? Or do their material bodies require the society of other humans? Before this debate plays out in the third act of King Lear, it raged in the political philosophy of the sixteenth century.

II. HUMAN INSUFFICIENCY

Against the Aristotelian thesis for individual insufficiency, Machiavelli contends that political arrangements are neither naturally occurring structures nor fundamental to human existence. Near the beginning of the Discourses on Livy, he briefly

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17. OED Online, s.v. “affected,” adjective, def. 1a.
explains how humans became political, suggesting that people lived like nonhuman animals before they formed into societies. Although humans are naturally sufficient in themselves, they are also an extremely dangerous kind of animal. Machiavelli grounds his argument in human proclivity for violence and the protections that society affords its members. We gather in groups to defend ourselves from other humans rather than to provide any type of basic necessities. The philosopher begins the *Discourses* in this manner to reject any claim to politics being a natural or original state.

Near the beginning of the text, Machiavelli delineates three kinds of government, but rather than evaluating them, he dismisses arguments for the ethical or natural superiority of any political constitution and goes on to justify this stance through a narrative of primitivism.

These variations in government arise by chance among men. For since the inhabitants were sparse in the beginning of the world, they lived dispersed for a time like beasts; then, as generations multiplied, they gathered together, and to be able to defend themselves better, they began to look to whoever among them was more robust and of greater heart, and they made him a head, as it were, and obeyed him. From this arose the knowledge of things honest and good, differing from the pernicious and bad. For, seeing that if one individual hurt his benefactor, hatred and compassion among men came from it, and as they blamed the ungrateful and honored those who were grateful, and thought too that those same injuries could be done to them, to escape like evil they were reduced to making laws and ordering punishments for whoever acted against them: hence came the knowledge of justice.  

Against divine explanation of the commonwealth, Machiavelli argues that political structures come about by chance. God is removed from earthly society and human brutality fills his place. Prior to civilization, however, human beings are physically sufficient unto themselves. Prepolitical humans roamed the earth “like beasts,” living in solitude. These early humans existed independently of one another. In this narrative, humans did not require political society because they were hearty enough to brave the elements, find food, and defend themselves against nonhuman animals. The political arises for Machiavelli when a critical mass

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of people is reached. The philosopher describes this gathering together as the necessary product of an expanding human population. Society is the outcome of a demographic tipping point that would otherwise deteriorate into violence. But once that threshold has been reached, the group designates a leader “to defend themselves better.” Humans are the only true danger to other humans. Our proclivity for violence renders political arrangements necessary if we are to protect ourselves. Without the structures of society, humanity must perforce prey on itself. Justice for Machiavelli is that which protects the group and ensures political futurity. This narrative about early human society imagines that humans come together only to the degree that it is useful for protection.

Machiavelli’s formulation of prepolitical humans has a lasting impact on sixteenth-century conceptions of the political animal. In order to refute the Italian, Aristotelians argued that humans are fundamentally different from nonhuman animals and could never have lived without political society. Writers at the end of the sixteenth century critique the Italian’s primitivism through an unexpected strategy. Rather than demonstrating that humans are somehow better than their nonhuman counterparts, they use the language of human negative exceptionalism to theorize political structures. They contend that our physical weakness necessitates political community.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the discourse of human negative exceptionalism is widespread and available for redeployment—so widespread that Montaigne could criticize the trope as the “vulgar complaints that I hear men make.” 20 Richard Hooker is an Aristotelian who rails against Machiavelli’s atheistic philosophy but reverses a common anti-Machiavellian strategy. Rather than celebrating the human as exceptional, Hooker contends that humans are incomplete. We are, in Aristotle’s words, parts of the whole that is the polis. People mutually constitute each other. Hooker, however, extends the arch philosopher’s ideas by not only arguing that humans are insufficient but also by going on to claim that we are defective and imperfect as individuals: “But for as much as we are not by our selves sufficient to furnish ourselves with competent store of things needfull for such a life as our nature doth desire, a life fit for the dignitite of man: therefore to supply those defects and imperfections, which are in us living, single, and solelie by our selves, we are naturally induced to seeke communion and fellowship with others. This was the cause of mens uniting themselves

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at the first in politique societies.”

Insufficiency is human nature insofar as we cannot exist alone. We have defects that can only be accommodated by other people. Hence, humans mutually constitute each other. To be human is to be part of a group. This radical incompleteness is not a weakness but rather a great strength for Hooker as accommodating such needs is the essence of political association. Without other humans, we cannot feed or clothe ourselves. We are always reliant on others. Whereas Machiavelli describes a transition from humans living “for a time like beasts,” only coming together when such protections from other groups of humans were necessary, Hooker maintains that humans cannot exist in solitude. Therefore, natural desires for food or clothing are part of a desire for political life.

Writers use the idea of human insufficiency as constitutive of the political to various philosophical and partisan ends. The diversity of authors using this trope suggests its ubiquity. Although Hooker and Persons are politically and rhetorically distinct, they both use accounts of human insufficiency in their political writing. Persons begins his discussion of natural sociability by following Aristotle: “no man of himselfe is sufficient for himselfe, & he that liveth alone can have no benefite of others.”

Persons, however, departs from the typical language of Aristotelian insufficiency by employing the discourse of human negative exceptionalism. Rather than critiquing the human, however, he uses the ubiquitous complaint about the weaknesses of the human body to give a material explanation for our political nature.

For Persons, human insufficiency begins at birth because human infants are the most helpless of all newborn creatures. Whereas we are dependent on our parents, nonhuman animals are born with strong bodies that serve to protect them. Persons writes,

not only Aristotle but Theophrastus also Plutarch, and others do confirme the same, by the poore estate & condition, wherein man is borne, more infirme then any other creature, though by creation he be lord & governor of al the rest: for where as ech other creature is borne in a certayne sort armed and defended in it selfe, as the bul with his horns, the bore with his tuske, the bear & wolfe, with their teath, the birde with hir fethers agaynst cold & with her wynges to flye away, the hart & hare with their swiftnes and the like: only man is borne feble and naked, not able to prouide or defende himselfe in many yeares, but only by the healp of others, which is a token that he is borne to liue in company and to be holpen by others, & this not only for his necessity and help at his begining whiles he is in this

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22. R. Doleman [Robert Persons], A Conference about the next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland (Antwerp, 1595), 5.
imbecility, but also for his more comodious liuing in the rest of his dayes afterwards, seing no man of himselfe is sufficient for himselfe.\textsuperscript{23}

Persons opens this passage with the familiar language of human negative exceptionalism but redeployes the trope to very different ends. He begins by grappling with the apparent contradiction that humans are both lord over all other animals and yet “more infirme” than supposedly lesser creatures and lack the basic necessities required to defend themselves against violence. “Fble and naked,” human infants rely completely on their caretakers. Persons goes even further to argue that this lack extends beyond the weakness of childhood; “to be holpen by others” is the natural state of humanity. All humans are reliant on a community for “comodious liuing.” For Persons, our helplessness in infancy is also a “token” of our sociability, a sign of our nature according God’s design. Humans are the natural accommodation of other humans.

La Primaudaye takes this line of argument further in the second part of The French Academie, contending that human vulnerability is not only a symbol of God’s will but also part of God’s design to make humans better than nonhuman animals by forcing them to recognize the immorality of violence and to live in political society. La Primaudaye contextualizes man’s insufficiency within divine will. In Thomas Bowes’s 1594 English translation, he posits that “God hath placed him [man] in this world vnarmed and naked, so that if men be disposed to hurt and to warre one upon another, they must deforme themselues, and borowe weapons from others, wherby they transforme themselues & become monstruous, as though they were transfigured into sauage beasts & into monsters.”\textsuperscript{24} God nudges humans toward proper behavior by not giving them the same protections afforded beasts, whereby they must “borowe weapons” from nonhumans in order to fight. People must suffer the consequences of violence on delicate skin. Human nakedness, however, is not only the material embodiment of a divine commandment against bloodshed; it also forces humans to rely on each other. La Primaudaye argues that it was “by his very skinne, that he [God] created him [man] to liue in company and felowship, and in peace with those of his owne kinde, to helpe all and to hurt none.”\textsuperscript{25} The weakness and vulnerability that characterize the human body are the condition of sociability. Human skin does not afford the independence and brutality of which nonhuman animals are capable, unless much blood is to be shed. This narrative, of course, critiques the failure of our species to abstain from the violence that so easily rips through soft human skin. La Primaudaye calls human society “monstrous” because it falls short of the more

\textsuperscript{23} Doleman [Persons], 5.
\textsuperscript{25} La Primaudaye, 405.
noble promise embodied in its fragile frame. La Primaudaye’s condemnation of human violence is simultaneously a condemnation of disobedience to God. Divine command is built into the human body and this “instruction ought to worke two things especially in him: first, it ought to induce and mooue him to that peaceable and sociable life with his kinde, for the which God created him. Secondly, by this means he is the more bound to acknowledge the prouidence, bountie & liberality of God towards him, whereby he bringeth to passe, that the necessitie and want, which seemeth to be greater in man then in any other liuing creature, declareth him to be the richest, and best provided for, yea to be Lord of all.” Vulnerable human bodies should instruct us to create more peaceful political systems but fail to do so. Human insufficiency can force people together out of necessity, but it cannot force us to live as we ought—that is, to treat others kindly. This condition should also compel humans to recognize the generosity of God, who has made humans lord over all nonhuman animals. In fact, this “necessitie and want” “declareth” humans to be the most accommodated of all animals insofar as political assemblages are a natural state. La Primaudaye inverts the trope of human insufficiency by rendering weaknesses to be the signs of our exceptional position in both the hierarchy of the world and in God’s grace.

Persons and La Primaudaye reinvent the trope of human insufficiency, which is pervasive at the end of the sixteenth century. In fact, it is so pervasive that Montaigne can assume his readers will recognize the commonplace. The essayist uses a quotation from early in book 5 of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* as a stock example. He derides this ubiquitous critique in which people describe humans as the only animal abandoned naked on the naked earth, tied, bound, having nothing to arm and cover ourselves with except the spoils of others; whereas

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26. La Primaudaye, 406.
27. Although this essay focuses on Persons’s and La Primaudaye’s use of the trope of human insufficiency, other writers also use it to describe our political nature. See, e.g., Matthew Kellison, *A Survey of the New Religion Detecting Manie Grosse Absurdities Which It Implieth* (Doway, 1603), 476–77. In the seventeenth century, John Bramhall redeploys the trope to critique Hobbes’s account of humanity: “If God would have had men live like wild beasts, as lions, bears or tigers, He would have armed them with horns, or tusks, or talons, or pricks; but of all creatures man is born most naked, without any weapon to defend himself, because God had provided a better means of security, that is, the magistrate.” John Bramhall, *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, John Bramhall, D.D., Sometime Lord Archbishop of Armagh, Primate and Metropolitan of All Ireland: With a Life of the Author, and a Collection of His Letters* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1842), 4. 95.
all other creatures Nature has clothed with shells, husks, bark, hair, wool, spikes, hide, down, feathers, scales, fleece, and silk, according to the nature of their being; has armed them with claws, teeth, or horns for attack and defense; and had herself instructed them in what is fit for them—to swim, to run, to fly, to sing—whereas man can neither walk, nor speak, nor eat, nor do anything but cry, without apprentice-ship. . . . —those complaints are false, there is a greater equality and a more uniform relationship in the organization of the world. Our skin is provided as adequately as theirs with endurance against the assaults of the weather.  

Montaigne criticizes this commonplace for its degradation of the human form. Like the unfounded celebrations of humanity as categorically superior to nonhuman animals, this trope portrays humans as different in kind from other creatures. The thrust of his argument is that we are more similar than different. To make this case, Montaigne imagines human bodies to be as resilient as any other creature. He claims human skin is as rugged as beastly hide. Against the “vulgar complaints” of human inadequacy, Montaigne provides Shakespeare with the language to dramatize philosophical debates about our political nature. On the heath, King Lear rails against the thesis for insufficiency, imagining the human body to be as provided for as its creaturely cousins. He follows Machiavelli and Montaigne by fantasizing that individuals can live “like beasts,” without human society or the accommodation of other people. The tragedy, however, proves Lear to be delusional, failing to recognize the frailty of the human form.

III. LEAR’S ACCOMMODATION

King Lear enters into this debate about insufficiency by invoking the trope of human negative exceptionalism. In the naked body of an unknown beggar, Lear sees the human condition in what is one of the most recognizable passages in English literature. Lear asks, “Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha? Here’st three on’us are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommo-
dated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off you lendings: come unbutton here” (3.4.101–7). Lear unmistakably describes our extreme vulnerability, contrasting with the sufficiency of the dead animals whose dismembered parts make up human accommodation. Notwithstanding this recognition of human weakness, he believes that unaccommodated man can live by himself on the heath. Lear suggests that despite being poor, bare, and forked, humans can exist without these borrowed skins. He naively imagines humans to be sufficient unto themselves and capable of existing outside of society. The play, however, shows the idea of an unaccommodated man—the human who lives without the support of other people—to be a fantasy. No human is unaccommodated. No one can exist without political society.

Lear’s account of unaccommodated man demonstrates a desire to strip his body down to the thing itself, but the fully sufficient individual proves to be a fiction. In the uncorrected Quarto, he ends the speech by pleading, “come on bee true.”31 Lear believes that he can find the truth of human existence by removing the articles of clothing that represent everything from his status to his civil condition—the artifice of human society. This idea materializes in his fantasy that he can survive the storm. In response to Kent’s continual exhortations to enter the hovel, Lear tells him to take care of himself: “Prithee go in thyself, seek thine own ease” (3.4.22). With an implied individualism, Lear suggests that everyone can take care of themselves. Repeatedly, he implores Kent: “Let me alone” (3.4.3). Whereas he believes that he “will endure” the violence of the elements, his aged body highlights the ridiculousness of Lear’s imagined sufficiency—a fiction that recalls Machiavelli and Montaigne’s accounts of human physical fitness (3.4.18). Lear’s illusion of corporeal individualism, that his skin can withstand the unendurable cold and wet of the storm, that he could live a solitary existence like a beast, nearly kills him. Stanley Cavell argues that the characters’ unwillingness to be recognized by loved ones demonstrates a deep shame for the dependency inherent in love. Resistance to this emotional vulnerability fuels the tragedy.32 This dependency, however, is not only the emotional exposure required by love but also the corporeal weakness that requires us to be helped.

The scenes on the heath dramatize human vulnerability through Lear’s exposure to the storm. When Kent tries to convince Lear to take shelter, he argues that

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31. Shakespeare, King Lear, 279.
“Man’s nature cannot carry / Th’affliction, nor the fear” resulting from the monstrous storm (3.2.48–49). The human body will not withstand such abuse. Lear’s desire to face the elements unencumbered, however, evokes the very terms of Persons’s and La Primaudaye’s accounts of bodily vulnerability. He is mesmerized by Edgar’s “uncovered body” and desires to cast off his own “lendings” (3.4.100). But the image of Lear bearing his grey and withered chest suggests that humans are anything but physically fit. Whether he is “feble and naked” as in Persons’s words or has fragile “skinne” as in La Primaudaye’s words, “man” is defined by weakness. On the heath amidst the storm, Lear calls to the disguised Edgar that “this contentious storm / Invades us to the skin” (3.4.6–7). Notwithstanding his clothing, the storm rages on Lear’s vulnerable body.33 Contra Montaigne, Lear’s skin is inadequately “provided” to “withstand the assaults of the weather.”

The protections that his companions afford him demonstrate that human insufficiency must be accommodated by other people. Lear is wholly incapable of weathering the storm alone and needs the other characters. While trying to remove the clothes that protect his fragile body against the storm, Lear is stopped by other characters from exposing himself completely. In the Arden edition, R. A. Foakes maintains Nicholas Rowe’s eighteenth-century stage direction: “Tearing at his clothes, he is restrained by Kent and the Fool.”34 Although other editors omit this interpolation, it embodies the Fool’s call for Lear to “be contented” (3.4.108). They try to stop him from desiring that which would be disastrously harmful to the old man’s body. This momentary act of kindness is far more indicative of human nature than Lear’s fantasy of exposure to the storm and acts as a counter-narrative illustrating the necessity of shared life. In Persons’s words, to be human is “to be holpen by others.”

These themes of shared vulnerability and mutual constitution ring out in the poetic form of the scenes. At the start of act 3, scene 4, the frenzied lines of Lear present multiple perspectives, seeming to reject or revise each thought even as it is being articulated. This chaotic style, of course, illustrates Lear’s unhinged mind, but it also serves to disorient the audience, a disorientation that only increases when Edgar as Poor Tom steps onto the stage. The dazzling kaleidoscope of allusions, perspectives, and persons makes following the narrative exceptionally difficult. This chaos, however, is anchored by refrains that bring poetic coherence to the scene. Amidst Lear’s ranting, Kent persistently beseeches the old man

33. For a different account of this line, see Steve Mentz, “Strange Weather in King Lear,” Shakespeare, 6, no. 2 (2010): 139–52. Mentz argues that the mutual impenetrability of the storm and Lear’s skin demonstrates the epistemological inaccessibility of nonhuman nature. The brutal weather “isolates the body’s vulnerability” and “re-confines the self inside the body” (143).
34. Shakespeare, King Lear, 279.
to take refuge in the hovel. From the opening line of act 3, scene 4, he implores, “Good my lord, enter.” Lear denies the requests, but Kent’s attempt to care for his master is emphasized every time the invitation recurs in the unvarying refrain: “Good my lord, enter.” It opens the scene and is repeated three more times, taking a slightly different form at the end of the scene when Gloucester and Kent usher Lear toward the former’s home (3.4.1, 4, 5, 22). This acoustic repetition grounds the passage in the characters’ unflagging desire to protect the old man’s fragile body. A second refrain acts as a counterpart to Kent’s continual care. Edgar calls out in (what might be called) the third person: “Poor Tom’s a-cold” (3.4.143). The figure of Poor Tom comes to stand in for human vulnerability, and the repetition of “Tom’s a-cold” four times during the scene brings the emphasis back to human need. Poor Tom cannot, in Persons’s articulation, “prouide or defende himselfe,” but other people can. Reverberations of “Poor Tom’s a-cold” create an atmosphere of vulnerability—a call for succor in an unaccommodating environment. The bodies of Lear and Edgar emote an ambience of insufficiency, the feelings of mutual need. The point is that “unaccommodated man” is a myth, a fiction of Lear’s sad and desperate imagination, a fiction that fails to see the nature of human society both around him and even in the naked body of Edgar. Lear needs these people even though he does not want them.

Earlier in act 3, scene 2, however, Lear does seem to recognize the vulnerability of others if not his own. He even feels empathy for someone when he asks the Fool, “How dost my boy? Art cold? / I am cold myself” and then confesses that he has “one part in my heart / That’s sorry yet for thee” (3.2.67–69, 72–73). In this moment, Lear acknowledges their mutual helplessness and inadequacy against the cold of the storm. The brief exchange between a former king and his jester depicts Lear recognizing the universality of human need—in this case, the desire to be warm. The old man’s life is only maintained by Kent’s continual ushering toward the relative warmth of the straw-filled hovel. Lear’s earlier dismissal of need—his sarcastic begging for “raiment, bed, and food” in act 2, scene 2—comes into stark contrast with this scene’s depiction of need as definitive of human shared experience. Nonhuman animals need no bed. Their bodies are their raiment. By contrast, humans are defined by physical requirements that can only be provided by other humans. Gloucester provides the haggard men with “fire and food” without which they would not have survived the night (3.4.149). In lines following Lear’s recognition of the Fool’s coldness, the fallen king remarks on his changing sense of need: “The art of our necessities is strange, / And can make vile things precious. Come; your hovel” (3.2.71–72). Human necessities—the very basis of existence—are accommodated only by other people.

These most basic of desires constitute a need for the polis. Hooker maintains that political association must begin with such needs: “The Apostle [Timothy] in exhorting men to contentment, although they have in this world no more then
Arguing that sociability is one foundation of the commonwealth, Hooker describes the very least of what is necessary for political society and human existence. In his account of food and clothing, Hooker argues that “yet these must be left” because “in as much as righteous life presupposeth life, in as much as to live virtuously it is impossible except we live, therefore the first impediment, which naturally we endeavor to remove, is penurie and want of things without which we cannot live.” Someone must furnish these essentials, as no one is sufficient unto themselves. Thus, need—the desire for continuance, survival, mere existence—is a desire for the political, an account of mutual human constitution as experienced through sensations of hunger and cold. Although King Lear seems to upend Aristotle’s division between natural life and political life, the Greek philosopher himself occasionally wavers from a strict delineation between bios and zoe. He argues, “The good life is the chief end, both for the community as a whole and for each of us individually. But men also come together, and form and maintain political associations, merely for the sake of life; for perhaps there is some element of the good even in the simple act of living.” By allowing that mere life may be a good in and of itself, Aristotle suggests that zoe can become entangled in bios. For many early modern thinkers like Shakespeare and Hooker, the necessities of mere life are the driving force of political attachments.

The tragedy plays with the meanings of “necessity” in order to suggest that insufficiency is both our defining characteristic and the irresistible draw toward political formations. In the Persons and La Primaudaye passages above, “necessitie” points to the constellation of definitions explored in the play. Necessity is a lack that is definitive of human experience, the material weakness of the body. It also suggests that which is required for survival. These two sides of necessity represent human insufficiency as both a fundamental deficiency and a requirement that must be fulfilled for an individual to exist. Taken as whole, repetition of “necessity” and “need” in the play further suggests that the politics of insufficiency is a compulsion to a natural order. The human is a state of deprivation. We cannot but act in a manner that tends toward the formation of collectives because our vulnerable bodies cannot exist by other means.

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36. Hooker, 1.10.2.
37. Aristotle, Politics, 3.6.4.
38. OED Online, s.v. “necessity,” noun, def. 2.
IV. EMERGENT POLITICS

By imagining insufficiency to be the foundation of the political, early modern writers revised the scale at which human collectivity is understood. Political analogies such as subjection or consent conceive of politics as resulting from an imagined human psychology. An individual can agree to participate in a collective or be coerced to do so. Both subjection and consent use a single fictional person as their organizing metaphor. Conversely, human insufficiency describes political affect in terms of an impersonal desire for the political. This need precedes choices and actions, creating a philosophy that does not use an imagined person as its medium for thought. The political is emergent insofar as it arises from causes—namely, vulnerabilities and requirements—that create something that exceeds the sum of their individual effects. Human insufficiency concerns the material needs of the body rather than the choices or actions of a particular person. Complexity only comes about through the accretive nature of such needs. Dramatic literature is the optimal medium with which to interrogate the human form. Because theater begins with human bodies performing characters, these forms can be strangely taken apart through the course of a play.39 King Lear dramatizes the discourse of human insufficiency by evacuating the individual as a viable unit of political thought. Moving constantly toward abstraction, the play shifts the scale of politics by focusing on impersonal needs and vulnerabilities. “The human” ceases to signify individual people and comes to represent our mutual constitution.

Scholarship on King Lear has long recognized the play’s tendency toward abstraction, but it has not fully explored the political import of this style of representation. Some of the best political scholarship on the play illustrates the tension between the individual and the abstract. John Danby’s classic reading splits the “good” and “bad” characters into two camps, the former signifying Richard Hooker’s account of nature and the latter anticipating that of Thomas Hobbes. By focusing on individuals, he assumes that literature represents political philosophy through a character’s words and actions, all representing a stable signified. Danby writes that Edgar plays many roles including “beggarman, peasant, gentleman, national champion (a kind of Unknown Soldier), and finally the King... But in each role the same man is acting.”40 He equates the actor with the character, imagining that there is a man behind the roles presented, a final identity that is truly Edgar. This focus on the individual, however, is at odds with the play’s representational tendencies, which Danby notes in the same study. In an often quoted description, he suggests that “at the beginning of the play we are watching an old


man and his awkward family. At the end all we can see is stricken Humanity holding murdered Nature in its arms. No play grows so fast or so far as King Lear.41 Danby identifies the movement toward the universal for which the play seems to continually strive and yet seems to be stuck in a mode of character analysis. More recently, scholarship on King Lear has noticed the play’s tendency to eschew the individual in favor of the universal. Valerie Traub contextualizes King Lear within cartographic and anatomical discourses, arguing that the play (like these fields) works toward abstraction, creating the very concept of a universal human—in other words, the birth of “normal.”42 Gil contends that Gloucester’s mock suicide and the trial scene eject audiences from “a character-driven and narratological relation to the play” revealing that the identities of these characters (like all social forms) are extensions of sovereign power.43 He posits that a bond based on a mutual recognition of bare life presents itself in these moments.44 This trend in scholarship highlights the play’s universalizing tendency that arguably culminates in the middle of act 3.

The scenes on the heath revise stable conceptions of the individual through a patchwork of enmeshed performances. The banished Kent performs the character Caius in order to serve his king as the blunt but ever loyal servant. Edgar performs the role of Poor Tom in order to disguise himself from the men who search for him. There are no discrete individuals in this scene. Lear fails to recognize the people around him but instead sees only his own troubles in the plight of others, asking Edgar if his poverty results from giving away everything to his two daughters (3.4.48–49). Lear can neither see individuals in this moment nor are they presented. Edgar’s Poor Tom contains multitudes by the nature of the role. Vexed by foul fiends and devils, Poor Tom exists as a collection of cruel spirits and a tortured body. He seems to relay different voices from various perspectives, parroting catechisms, voices of devils, popular ballads, and nonsense rhymes. In an essay on Poor Tom as a character in his own right, Simon Palfrey suggests that act 3, scene 4, portrays a dissolution of identity and a melding of the human form with the environment.45 The larger project from which his essay comes, however, presents more varied perspectives on Tom, persuasively arguing that Edgar’s lines as

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41. Danby, Shakespeare’s Doctrine, 175.
43. Gil, Shakespeare’s Anti-politics, 122.
44. See also James Kearney, “Phenomenology and Ethics: ‘This Is above All Strangeness’: King Lear, Ethics, and the Phenomenology of Recognition,” Criticism 54, no. 3 (2012): 455–67. Kearney makes a Levinasian argument about the figure of Poor Tom as a stranger who brings the opacity of other minds to the fore for Lear and Gloucester.
Tom are wholly disconnected from the other characters’ dialogue, producing a performance problem for the other players whose cues are frenzied ramblings that have no bearing on the action of the scene. At one point, Palfrey asserts that “Tom suffers and reproduces ideas, ideologies, institutions, a moment-by-moment living of the political” and so embodies Agamben’s account of “bare life.”46 For Palfrey, Tom’s character evokes myriad conceptions of the political, which cannot be reconciled with the prepolitical suffering of his body. He resists arguing whether Tom “points farther ahead to a new politics, beyond modernity’s ‘biopolitical’ deployment of the body.”47 Rather than point to a new politics, I suggest that Tom reimagines a very old one, a philosophy that conceives of the political as ontologically prior to the individual. The politics of human insufficiency is completely alien to both the natural rights discourse that will emerge later in the seventeenth century and to the Foucauldian political state that looms so large in the imaginations of recent literary criticism.

I want to see a politics in Poor Tom’s body but cast off the “bare life” hermeneutic that obscures rather than elucidates this figure. Poor Tom explodes the individual human form into myriad perspectives and yet comes to represent a mere body. The deranged king contrasts the naked Edgar with the Fool, Kent, and himself by saying that whereas Poor Tom is the “thing itself,” they are “sophisticated,” meaning that not only are they changed from their natural form but also that they are somehow adulterated versions of a purer human.48 They are corrupt by comparison with this unadorned body. But even as Lear calls Edgar the “thing itself,” “a poor, bare, forked animal,” their interaction reveals that Edgar is far from unaccommodated. Although the character of Poor Tom has not been provided for in the sense that no one cares for him, Edgar is accommodated in the sense that he needs human association. Even the most miserable humans cannot live completely apart from society and Poor Tom accordingly lives not alone but on the edges of human communities, eating their refuse. He poses as a beggar, someone who can only live off the pity of others. Gloucester points out later in the play that “he has some reason, else he could not beg” (4.1.33). Though seemingly outside of society, Poor Tom participates in it by necessity.

By looking at the relations between characters, we can develop a more apt strategy for analyzing political thought in King Lear. Lear’s desire for community takes a strange and fascinating form during the scene in which he encounters Edgar. The mad king wanted to talk with the beggar, whom he calls “philosopher,” “learned Theban,” and “good Athenian” (3.4.150, 153, 176). But in this scene Lear

46. Palfrey, Poor Tom, 107.
47. Palfrey, 108.
48. OED, s.v. “sophisticated.”
not only highlights the human necessities for food and clothing; he also demonstrates the necessity of human company. I suggest that this calling for Edgar is of the utmost philosophical importance and is the culmination of the scene's investigation of the political animal. The random anonymity of the act indicates a desire for human interaction that exceeds the bounds of the individual. In the storm scenes, identity fades in spite of the continual refrain of "Who's there?" (3.1.1; 3.2.39; 3.4.41). Identities are demanded, but no one answers with so much as a title. Rather, responses splinter a stable sense of these characters. We hear that one is "minded like the weather," two are "grace and a codpiece," and another is a "spirit" (3.1.2; 3.2.40; 3.4.42). When Gloucester enters later in scene 4, an onslaught of questions emerges from each of the characters, "What's he?" "Who's there?" and "What are you there?" (3.4.122–24). These multivocal reverberations replay the opening line of Hamlet, but rather than indicating the challenge of epistemological certainty and the unknowability of other minds, the lines in King Lear reject the idea that identity matters at all for the formation of political collectives. Human need comes to the fore, separated from the individual. Stable conceptions of selves fade in these scenes in which the evacuation of sovereignty, which began in the opening scene, reaches its completion. Lear is only interested in the "company" of the "Noble philosopher," refusing to leave the naked body of his new companion (3.4.168). The former king seems to embody the force of sociability itself, calling everyone to join this philosopher in the hovel: "Come, let's in all" (3.4.171). The fiction of the unaccommodated man dissolves in the storm and all that is left is the mutual constitution of this assemblage on a bare stage—helpless bodies desiring the political.

This article's exploration of the political discourse of human insufficiency revises key assumptions about early modern definitions of the political. Against divisions of public and private, political and social, individual and collective, subject and structure, these texts suggest that such partitions obscure less obvious styles of political thinking circa 1600. King Lear articulates an emergent politics that abandons the individualized subject. State structures do not arise from the conscious choices of individuals in the form of either consent to authority or domination of others. Rather, the seemingly infinite needs of human beings accumulate into complex formations. The thesis of human insufficiency suggests that there is no particular space that the political occupies, nor is there the possibility of a prepolitical exis-

tence. Humans are political animals by our very nature because we cannot but exist through collectives. This argument, however, does not imply that all political structures are just. On the contrary, any government, group, or individual can ignore human need to greater or lesser degrees, but it cannot deny it wholesale. Yet the recognition of insufficiency as the basis of communal life provides a logic for more just political structures. Vulnerability matters because it changes the terms of political participation. The problem with something like consent as the analogy governing political life is the problem of representation. Who speaks? And who is heard? What constitutes consensual governance? Moreover, need as an analogy for political philosophy works to incorporate nonhuman life into the polis, recognizing mutual interconnectivity, weakness, and reliance as political foundations. The methodology of such political thinking shifts away from critique and toward the possibilities that new coalitions can take. In the solemn, frenetic refrain “Poor Tom’s a-cold,” we can hear a more just political paradigm calling out over the bleak heath.