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**Review of Feisal G. Mohamed, *Sovereignty: Seventeenth-Century England and the Making of the Modern Political Imaginary***

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Feisal G. Mohamed, *Sovereignty: Seventeenth-Century England and the Making of the Modern Political Imaginary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 220. Hardback. \$85.00.

Feisal Mohamed's *Sovereignty* combines broad historical knowledge with sustained, probing attention to political theory, and it will certainly be of interest to Marvellians. The book's closest connections in literary scholarship are to the work of politically savvy scholars like Graham Hammill, Victoria Kahn, Julia Lupton, and Mary Nyquist, but Mohamed's primary interlocutor is the twentieth-century jurist Carl Schmitt, who appears throughout the book as the key theorist of sovereignty in later modernity. Sovereignty, Mohamed explains, becomes central to European political thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a result of the Reformation and the rise of capitalism. These developments interrupted medieval consensus over political and social authority—or at least interrupted a rosy view of medieval consensus in the minds of early modern thinkers—and they also raised the issue of interest groups (religious factions or economic sectors, for example) emerging and exercising undue influence. In the face of this lost consensus, the concept of sovereignty became a compensatory means of bringing power and authority into alignment again. One of the central themes of Mohamed's book is, however, his skepticism about whether this political Humpty Dumpty can be put back together again. "Once political ideas no longer rest on a set of universally accepted claims," he asserts, only power—not authority—really counts, and thus a merely instrumental reason of state, not normative natural law, consistently dominates Mohamed's modern politics (193). "It is the nature of modern political order to deposit great *potestas* in a sovereign who cannot command great *auctoritas*," he writes, and this bleak assertion makes both the concept of sovereignty and the "modern political life" associated with it a "self-deluding commitment" and "an unfolding tragedy perpetually on the brink of catastrophe" (6, 193).

Through this account of early modern sovereignty, Mohamed offers a critique of other historiographical and theoretical categories that he feels have run their course or that perhaps were never very useful in the first place. "Republicanism," he suggests, has become too diffuse a category, at least in its classical form, and "political theology," he worries, has become merely a set of axiomatic mottos. The potentially liberalizing categories of "parliamentary supremacy" and "popular sovereignty," similarly, are simultaneously too idealizing and too amorphous to capture the way that power really operates. Mohamed does not belabor his contestation of these categories, but even in handling them briefly, he positions his book to engage with a broad range of both historiography and theory on politics and literature in early modernity.

The chapters of Mohamed's book offer case studies that reveal how varied accounts of sovereignty could be in early modern England. The first chapter examines how two

very different thinkers—Thomas Hobbes and Lord Saye and Sele—responded to the depersonalization of power in the seventeenth century. Here Mohamed tracks the shift from feudal political relations based on concrete land-holding and military service to more legalistic and abstract administrative mechanisms that increasingly emerged as rivals to the king’s personal authority: the Court of Wards and Liveries, the corporation sole, and the colonial corporation. Against the backdrop of these changes, Hobbes becomes for Mohamed a relatively conservative figure interested in using the modern language of contract and interest to reconstruct the monarch’s feudal authority. Saye, in contrast, provides an example of how one might embrace the new politics of bureaucracy and legalism to rein in the monarch and preserve a constitutional state of divided sovereignty. Ultimately, both thinkers represent examples of the mechanization of the state that Schmitt deplored, and Mohamed builds on his reading of Hobbes to argue that Schmitt is both more dissatisfied with and less comprehending of Hobbes than has typically been acknowledged.

In his second chapter, Mohamed investigates how romance could operate politically in the seventeenth century. In John Barclay’s early Stuart *Argenis*, Mohamed sees a defense of royal prerogative against a politically powerful nobility even as he also notes a demystification of hereditary kingship. Mohamed then observes something quite different in mid-century romances such as Percy Herbert’s *Cloria and Narcissus*, which deemphasizes the value of hereditary monarchy “in a way that is genuinely uncertain about [the] political future even as it solidifies the social bonds of the [elite, landed] audience it addresses” (88). In this openness, Mohamed finds an intimation of Hannah Arendt’s *vita activa*, which necessarily entails uncertain outcomes, as opposed to Schmittian *nomos*, which (literally) grounds political order in the reassuringly concrete and conservative arrangements of land distribution.

As he moves into the second half of his book, Mohamed refocuses on canonical literary figures, namely Milton and Marvell. In chapter three, he argues for seeing Milton not as “bending toward Enlightenment liberalism” nor as “looking back to classical republicanism,” but instead as arguing throughout his career for a strong conception of unitary sovereignty (135). This conception evolves over the course of Milton’s career: in *Comus*, for example, Mohamed reads Milton as advocating for the royal prerogative represented by the earl of Bridgewater, while by the 1671 poems the sovereignty of God’s sublime authority is utterly paramount. Mohamed’s primary focus, though, is on Milton’s mature political prose, which founds his conception of sovereignty on “the people” understood as a virtuous minority. In his prose works and the late poems Milton closely resembles a figure of longstanding interest to Mohamed, the godly republican Henry Vane. More remarkably, Mohamed also sees Milton as resembling Schmitt insofar as Milton answers crisis with an appeal to “the organic

unity” of “the will of the people”: as Mohamed writes, “there seems as much common ground between Milton and Schmitt as there is between Hobbes and Schmitt” (135).

The final chapter of *Sovereignty* will be of particular interest to readers of this journal. Here, Mohamed traces Marvell’s conflicted position on sovereignty through works chosen from a variety of stages in his career: the early Cavalier verse, the poems in praise of Cromwell, and *An Account of the Growth of Popery*. Like Milton, Marvell adopts a strongly unitary view of sovereignty, but Marvell does not derive from this view the older poet’s idealistic vision of godly rule; instead, Marvell’s unitary sovereignty is founded on mere *de facto* power, power that Marvell tolerates only “with his nose firmly held” (173). This Marvell is a realist, but he remains committed to limiting arbitrary power through rule of law and the rights of individual subjects. Thus, although Mohamed denies Milton his accustomed place as a harbinger of liberalism, he nonetheless acknowledges that “Marvell anticipates the values of modern liberals” (173). Such a description obviously suggests a Marvell who is quite different from Schmitt, yet here too, Mohamed finds resonances between early modernity and the twentieth century. Marvell shares with Schmitt a deep concern that special interests may come to dominate pluralistic political systems, and Mohamed suggests that in “a world without natural foundations of authority, without a set of norms that all can accept,” both men believe that “there must be an entity”—the sovereign—“capable of ordering political community” through force (177). Marvell takes no pleasure in the state violence that Schmitt at times embraces, but he too accepts it as the price of “creat[ing] space for a public spirit expressing itself in individual liberty and civic-minded associations” (179).

Finally, readers interested in getting at the heart of Mohamed’s argument might want to skip right to his epilogue, which returns to the relationship between Hobbes and Schmitt. Mohamed shrewdly reads Hobbes’s references to the biblical figure of Uzzah—whom God struck down for steadying the tottering Ark of the Covenant—as reflections on how the sovereign may not honor the exchange of protection and obligation that underpins Hobbesian absolutism, and Schmitt, Mohamed argues, comes to similar insights after being rejected by the Nazi Party he had sought to serve. Both thinkers thus expose how unitary sovereignty just does not work in the modern world, where a fundamentally “fractious” society allows for special interests that may turn the state’s power against faithful citizens (193). And their cases epitomize as well two key lessons of the book as a whole: first, how power becomes paramount in the absence of theoretical consensus about politics, and, second, how the rise of sovereignty is deeply at odds with our desire for justice and freedom. As Mohamed concludes, “the ultimate message of these apostles of modern political thought is that we should ... live enslaved or die trying” (193).

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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