

# The Influence of Early Modern Theories of Governance on the Corporeal Images of the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto

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Focusing on the figure of the monarch, Shakespeare's *King Lear* reflects the nature of kingship from a delicately refined Renaissance point of view. Serving as a dramatized version of the contemporaneous genre "mirror of governance," the 1608 chronicle history thematizes such central concerns of power as responsibility, inheritance and flattery, which were particularly topical in the early Jacobean era. While the dramatic structure of the play strongly resembles that of political moralities (see Bradley 226, Mack 58, and Potter 152), the poetic text draws heavily upon powerful images referring to the human body as a whole and also to its parts (see Spurgeon 339, Hillman 81). Although today scholars tend to turn to the references concerning Lear's physical body, the author of this paper sides with critics including Mary Axton and Albert Rolls, whose studies link *King Lear* with Renaissance political concepts based on the analogy between the state and the human body. In what follows, the paper first summarizes the presence of the corporeal images in contemporaneous governance theories, and then it shows how they determine historical readings of the 1608 *King Lear* quarto.

## Corporeal Images in Early Modern Theories of Governance

In the field of political science, the metaphor of the "body politic" has been widely used in many alternations since ancient times to describe the hierarchical structure of society as if it were a human body comprising separate members with specific functions that serve the interest of the whole organism. David George Hale, who vividly describes both its history and embedding in the early modern intellectual milieu, explains that although by the Restoration it had become a dead metaphor denoting the state, during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I it was widely used in public discourses for various purposes: "to defend and attack the established church, to promote order and obedience to secular rules, and to criticize political and economic abuses" (7).

In academic works, however, discussions concerning the body politic involve at least two closely-related notions that are rooted in ancient sources but are distinct in origin. While the "two bodies" theory focuses mainly on the twofold nature of the monarch's personality, the organic conception of the state is concerned with the function of the different members of society in its hierarchical structure.

## The King's Two Bodies

One of the central questions for lawyers in sixteenth-century England was to understand both the reason and implication of the paradox that the person of the monarch was not only a sacred man representing God on earth but also a human being who, although mortal, could maintain the continuity of the Crown. The most obvious way of developing a proper legal jargon was to borrow terms from the field of theology. This became particularly urgent after Henry VIII, by the Act of Supremacy separating the Church of England from the Catholic Church of Rome, became the leader of both the clerical and the socio-political structure of the kingdom. He replaced the Pope as head of the English/Anglican Church and therefore subordinated the “corpus mysticum” to his own “corpus politicum” (Kantorowitz 229).

During Queen Elizabeth's reign, out of fear of an absolutist monarch, a group of Catholic lawyers including Anthony Brown, William Rastel and Edmund Plowden used a secular version of the two bodies concept to highlight the difference between the legal status of an ordinary subject and a monarch, and also to find legal grounds for preventing the Queen from exceedingly strengthening her power. The book that records their ideas was published in 1588 under the title *Les Commentaries ou Reports de Edmund Plowden* (Kantorowitz 7-24). Their arguments derived from their interpretation of the Duchy of Lancaster case that dealt with the Queen's intention to revise Edward VI's donations of Duchy land in order to grant it to one of her own favourites. Commenting upon this legal debate, Edmund Plowden argues that the King incorporates two, clearly distinguishable but non-separable bodies in himself. One of them, which stands for the monarch's mortal and passionate self, he calls the “Body natural,” which is “subject to all Infinities that come by Nature or Accident ...: to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural bodies of other people” (Plowden qtd. in Kantorowitz 7). The “Body politic,” on the other hand, is an immortal essence that cannot be seen yet is void of all those deficiencies by which the other one is weakened. Since this second body is more perfect than the other, it is superior to the “Body natural,” and, as a general rule, “what the King does in his Body politic cannot be frustrated by any Disability in his natural body” (Kantorowitz 8). However, these two bodies were inseparable; they could not exist on their own but were united in the person of the King: “Notwithstanding that these two Bodies are at one Time conjoined together, yet the Capacity of the one does not confound that of the other, but they remain distinct Capacities. Ergo the Body natural and the Body politic are not distinct, but united, and as one Body” (12). Thus the main function of the Body politic is to maintain the continuity of the Crown regardless of the individual Kings' or Queens' death: whenever a monarch passes away only his or her Body natural dies and the Body politic is transferred or “demised” into the new monarch's Body natural (26). From a legal aspect, this idea also implies that the actual monarch and his or her predecessors and successors are the same entities or “souls” successively inhabiting the same “body,” and that therefore a king can never actually die (27).

Trying to prove the right of Mary, Queen of Scots to the English throne, Edmund Plowden and his fellow lawyers argued that regardless of common practice primogeniture, which kept the Crown within the realm of the closest succession, and

inheritance could not be treated as synonymous terms. While an ordinary person having only a Body natural could settle any dispute over his or her heritage by a will, the question of succession did not fall into the same category, as it concerned only monarchs vested with both a Body natural and a Body politic (Kantorowitz 16).

Jacobean lawyers led by Peter Wentworth also turned for help to the concept of the body politic when they wanted to strengthen their arguments for the claim of the Scottish King, James VI to the English crown (Kantorowitz 34). Unlike in *Plowden's Report*, their arguments were not based on the “gemina persona” of the monarch but rather on the anthropomorphic nature of the kingdom that needs only one head, which was obviously King James.

## The Organic Conception of the State

Comparison of the structure of society to the human body ultimately derives from Ancient as well as Christian sources,<sup>1</sup> but in English political thought it springs directly from the intellectual legacy of the twelve-century English bishop, John of Salisbury. Instead of relying either on the Pauline image of the “corpus mysticum” or Aristotle’s notion describing society as a human organism, he developed a remarkably comprehensive description of the state in his work entitled *Policratici sive de Nugis Curialium et Vestigiis Philosophorum* first published in 1159. His alleged source was Plutarch’s *Institutio Traiani*, but besides Salisbury’s reference there is no available record to support the existence of Plutarch’s work. Today the *Policraticus* is seen as an excellent medieval “compendium of all the lore surrounding the organic theory of the State” (Barkan 72), which in fact remained influential for many centuries (see Curtis 140). In the eight books of his work, John of Salisbury investigates how the individual can preserve his or her liberty and live a pleasant life by fulfilling a function in the organic body of state. There is more at risk here than individual happiness. Similar to how illness attacks the human body, if any member of society falls sick, this makes the whole body unable to function properly; it therefore follows that preservation of the mutually beneficial cooperation of the individual members serves the interest of the whole community. *Policraticus* presents the fully developed analogy as follows:

A commonwealth, according to Plutarch, is a certain body which is endowed with life by the benefit of divine favor ... And those who preside over the practice of religion should be looked up to and venerated as the soul of the body ... The place of the head in the body of the commonwealth is filled by the prince, who is subject only to God and to those who exercise His office

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1 The first written record is Isocrates’ *Areopagiticus* from 355 B.C., but this idea penetrates the writings of classical Greek philosophers. Its traces can be detected in Plato’s *Republic* and *The Laws*; Aristotle’s *Politics* and Cicero’s *De Officiis*. The Christian application of the idea first appears in Saint Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and later surfaces in the works of Thomas More, Sir Thomas Elyot, John Fisher, as well as for instance in the sermons of Stephen Gardiner, and Thomas Starkey (see Hale 18-68). Moreover, as Noemi Najbauer highlights, even John Donne, court preacher to King James, used the state as body imagery to ensure stability in society (189-93).

and represent Him on earth, even as in the human body the head is quickened and governed by the soul. The place of the heart is filled by the Senate, from which proceeds the initiation of good works and ill. The duties of eyes, ears, and tongue are claimed by the judges and governors of provinces. Officials and soldiers correspond to the hands. Those who always attend upon the prince are likened to the sides. Financial officers and keepers ... may be compared with the stomach and intestines. ... The husbandmen correspond to the feet, which always cleave to the soil, and need the more especially the care and foresight of the head. (John of Salisbury 64-65)

Obviously, in Salisbury's system the Prince, the head, is subordinated to the clergy, which the analogy identifies with the soul of the body. Although the description of social order presented in *Policraticus* marked the beginning of an extremely popular tradition in English political treaties, this function of the Church gradually faded away as English monarchs started to separate government from clerical powers (Rolls 78).

Under King James I's reign, the work that most directly relied on this legal tradition was Edward Forset's 1606 treaty, *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natvral and Politique*.<sup>2</sup> Besides being the Lord Chief Justice of London (Rolls 40), the author was also one of the lawyers representing the Crown at the trial of the Gunpowder Plot, and so his work can provide an excellent example of the royalist attitude and Jacobean discourse of legal writings. In the treaty the plot is mentioned in corporeal terms as if it "beheaded the whole Realme" (Forset sig. H.iii. r.), which exemplifies that the body politic becomes a "mishapen and distorted" monster if the parts or members do not administer to their appointed work (Forset sig. H.i. v.). On the other hand, the author compares the Island of Britannia to a body that needs only one head instead of two, which is undoubtedly a clear reference to the Union of England and Scotland embodied by King James who being a "vertuous and powerfull head should reunite and draw againe into one, the distracted and long repugning parts" (Forset sig. I.i. v-I.ii. r.). Besides legal treaties, even King James applied a similar rhetoric in his public speeches, calling himself the head and his people the body. In a 1996 article, Jonathan Baldo convincingly argues that for James the main motivation behind this propaganda was to hide his partiality to his Scottish subjects. As he argues, when the perfect sovereign is described as the head, he becomes a part of the body politic that is "an embodiment of the whole that will override party and faction", meaning that he could be trusted "to take the part of any of that body's wronged members. King James was especially concerned about presenting himself as impartial; given suspicions that he would be partial in his acts and decrees to the Scotsmen many English feared would impoverish their own country" (Baldo 46).

Nevertheless, identifying the King with the Head of the body politic has at least one consequence. Compared to the theory of the King's two bodies, the distinctive feature of the organic conception of the state is that it presents the Prince only as a single

2 Most of the written records with references to John of Salisbury are devotional writings but some of Shakespeare's fellow playwrights, including Ben Jonson, were also familiar with *Policraticus* (Barkan 90).

member of the larger organism of the body politic. As Paul Archambault explains: “the analogy of the body served the cause of a certain type of liberalism: a liberalism which, without repudiating the excellence of the monarchical form of government, constantly reminded the Prince that he was but a part, however superior, of a body larger than himself” (53). The focus of this paper now shifts onto Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in order to find the traces of these corporeal governance theories in the poetic features of the early modern text.

## The Presence of the Body Politic in the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto

When exploring *King Lear* in relation to the early Jacobean intellectual milieu, Mary Axton juxtaposes the theory of the King’s Two Bodies with the play and describes it as “a sensitive study of the disintegration of an inhuman political idea” (137). In her reading, Lear’s tragic error is the misinterpretation of his own role: he tries to behave as if he only had a body natural and disregards his responsibility as a monarch. With respect to the principle of royal inheritance, he cannot assign his property as his body natural wishes, yet he disregards this restriction at the beginning of the play. Lear’s error lies in treating the question of inheritance as a family matter. In this respect Lear is in sharp contrast with Gloster, who, having a body natural only, also commits the mistake of “misjudging his children,” yet the consequences of his error remain within the scope of the family, whereas Lear precipitates a series of events that have political significance. Although in the end Lear is able to restore his relationship with Cordelia, “there is no remedy for his offence against his body politic” (Axton 139). Axton argues that Shakespeare makes the audience focus on Lear, the man, especially after the storm scene, and from this point of view the play presents him as a man for whom “fatherhood means more than kingly power” (141). She also suggests that the performance of *King Lear* before King James I at Whitehall on Saint Stephen’s night in 1606 might have been understood by the audience as a warning against the non-human side of the concept of the King’s two bodies. Although Axton’s argumentation undoubtedly sounds convincing, the main shortcoming of her study is that she fails to notice that by King James’ reign, and also by the assumed 1608 inception of *King Lear*, the notion of the body politic appears in a discourse slightly different from the one in which Plowden and his contemporaries participated in the Elizabethan period.

As opposed to Axton, I argue that this corporal symbolism—with the help of rhetorical devices—demonstrates the relevance of the organic concept of state to the understanding of the subtle relationship between the characters and the king. From the beginning, the imagery of the play links expressions referring to various bodily organs to certain characters of the play. To take the most striking example, the tropes of the heart are connected to Cordelia’s figure whose name stems from the Latin word “cor,” meaning “heart.” As Tom McAlindon argues, not only does the trope of the heart describe Cordelia’s nature and dramatic role, but once she utters that she cannot heave her heart into her mouth, it also “functions as a silent pun” relying on the etymological root of her name (87). This connection between the name and the character is further supported by the lexical repetition of the word “heart” as Lear himself refers to Cordelia

with the trope of the heart three times in the first scene of the play.<sup>3</sup> Placed in the context of the organic conception of the state, Cordelia's name becomes significant as it fits into the system of corporal images and positions her character as the heart of Lear's body politic. When she answers her father's question by twice repeating the word "nothing," she makes a whole series of allusions to this political concept. As Northrop Frye comments: "The word *nothing* we remember from *Richard II*, where it was connected with the conception of the king's two bodies. In both plays nothing seems to have the meaning of being deprived of one's social function, and so of one's identity" (109).

Besides Cordelia, in the love contest scene Kent also identifies himself as an organ to describe his relation to Lear when he calls himself the "true blanke" of the King's eye. From a societal point of view the function of the eye together with the ears and tongue is applied to provincial governors in John of Salisbury's system, which describes their position in the following manner:

A governor is one who presides over the administration of justice among the people of a province. He therefore should have knowledge of the just and unjust, and should have the means and the will to enforce justice. For although the common lot of death ought not to be imputed to the physician, yet if tragic consequences are the result of his ignorance or lack of skill, they are deservedly charged to him. Furthermore, if he knows the proper remedy and refuses to apply it, he is condemned not for ignorance but for willful wrong. (123)

Kent's behavior in *King Lear* corresponds, to a certain extent, with the description provided in *Policraticus*. By contradicting Lear, he exercises his duty as a member of the body politic since in this system the eye is responsible for enforcing justice. This is precisely what Lear endangers when he banishes Cordelia. Quite remarkably, Kent's words also echo the duties of the governor cited above, as if he had learnt his obligations from Salisbury's *Policraticus*:<sup>4</sup> "Doe, kill thy Physicion, / And the fee bestow / vpon thy foule disease, / Reuoke thy doome, or, whilst I can vent clamour / From my throat, / ile tell thee thou dost euill" (Shakespeare sig. B3r.).

Still, it is worth noting that in the Shakespearean text Kent as the eye of the body politic appears as "blanke." The Oxford English Dictionary provides many definitions for this word, but as for its connection with the act of looking the following entry based on written records from the sixteenth century seems to be relevant here: "Of persons: (Looking) as if deprived of the faculty of speech or action; 'shut up,' utterly disconcerted, discomfited, resourceless, or non-plussed" ("Blank," def. 4b). Thus, the expression "the true blanke of thine eye" may metaphorically signal that, unlike Arostus

3 See "But goes this with thy heart?" (Shakespeare sig. B2r): "as a stranger to my heart and me" and "as here I giue, / Her fathers heart from her" (Shakespeare sig. B2v). All the citations from the play are based on a facsimile of the 1608 quarto edition, therefore instead of the Folio's conventional act-scene-line citation, this paper applies paginal references.

4 Without drawing further consequences from it, let me note that W.R. Elton starts discussing Kent's character with a direct quotation from *Policraticus* in order to illustrate that the subjects are responsible to their superiors (284).

in *The Tragedy of Gorboduc*, Shakespeare's Kent as an advisor can no longer function in the corporeal hierarchy of the state.

The correspondence between Kent and his function is also supported by the fact that his name is identical with the name of a province, which accords with Salisbury's description who assigns the role of "eyes" to governors. In a different context, Dan Brayton has already noted that the majority of male characters in *King Lear* bear names referring to certain territories, for which he gives the following explanation: "geography and aristocratic identity are inextricably linked in the imagery of feudal social order that the play constructs" (402). So when the country is seen as a body, the various counties and shires are members of that body and the aristocrats governing them are explicitly associated with these members.

Besides Kent, Gloster's name also recalls both a territory and the status of a governor; moreover, his persona is also characterized by the deprivation of a corporeal function. Similarly to Kent, he also manifests his loyalty to Lear, whom he still regards as the head of the kingdom. The first time he manifestly reveals his attitude to Lear happens when he warns Cornwall that his order to put Kent into the stocks would insult the King. Later his loyalty becomes the reason why Cornwall and Regan treat him as a traitor and pluck out his eyes.

According to Tibor Fabiny, Gloster's physical blindness in the figurative sense manifests his moral misjudgment of his two sons, but eventually this blindness is necessary in order to make him "see and understand reality" (468). Only after Gloster becomes blind does he learn that Edmund has betrayed him, and he realizes Edgar's true nature by relying on hearing only. Nevertheless, blindness, both in the physical and metaphorical sense, does not change his relationship with Lear, whom he recognizes easily even without eyes: "The tricke of that voyce I doe well remember, ist not the King"? (Shakespeare sig. I3v.). From Lear's point of view, Gloster contributes to his fall from power by supporting Edmund in becoming a credible and reliable "subject" of the kingdom. Although Edmund's deception affected Gloster's moral judgment, the text associates the sense of hearing with his fault. In order to expose Edgar's allegedly bad intentions Edmund makes the following suggestion: "If your honour iudge it meete, I will place you where you shall heare vs conferre of this, and by an *aurigular assurance* have your satisfaction" (Shakespeare sig. C2r., emphasis added). Then he saves Lear's life by overhearing Cornwall's plot against him. The image of hearing and proper judgment is also directly connected with Gloster's figure in Lear's instructions to him: "a man may see how this world goes with no eyes, looke with thy eares, see how yon Iustice railes vpon yon simple theefe, harke in thy eare handy, dandy, which is the theefe, which is the Iustice" (Shakespeare sig. I4r.). The emphatic presence of various references to the senses of hearing and seeing in Gloster's case seem to stay in line with the description for the function of governors being the eyes and ears of the body politic in Salisbury's system. Similarly to Kent, Gloster's behavior and diction also resemble that of a physician who intends to protect the King's health, as for instance in the following passage: "these iniuries / the King now beares, will be reuenged home / Ther's part of a power already landed, / We must incline to the King. I will seeke him, and / Priuily releuee him [...] though I die for't, as no lesse is threatned me, / the King my old master must be releueed" (Shakespeare. sig. G1r.). Before he is blinded on stage,

he boldly confronts Regan in order to protect Lear and warns her, “I would not see thy cruell nayles / Pluck out his poore old eyes, nor thy fierce sister / In his aurynted flesh rash borish fangs” (Shakespeare sig. H1v.).

Besides Kent, and Gloster, there is at least one more character who undoubtedly tries to insist that justice is done, and in a highly unusual way: in Cordelia’s absence, the Fool provides company for Lear and makes him confront his folly through his riddles, which figuratively comment on the plot. This character is known for his verbose diction, which Christy Desmet describes thus: “oral performances, being dependent on rhythm and sound, bring cultural wisdom before the mind’s eye by personification, stimulating imaginative vision through acoustic effects” (126). The Fool’s verbosity is in sharp contrast with Cordelia’s silence at the beginning of the play. Although the audience is provided with no information regarding the Fool’s earlier behaviour, the text of the play directly connects his intense linguistic activity with Lear’s division of the kingdom and its consequences. When the Fool appears on stage, Lear notices that his singing is unusual, and when he asks him for explanation the Fool answers: “I have vs’d it nuncle, euer since thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gauest them the rod, and put’st downe thine own breeches then they for sudden ioy did weep, and I for sorrow sung” (Shakespeare sig. D1r.). Besides singing, the other distinctive feature of the Fool’s utterances is that he never speaks in blank verse but applies similes, proverbs and “rhymed adages” sometimes much more for the sake of the audience than in order to communicate with the King (Clemen 141-42). Among others, Ted Hughes has noticed that the real power of the Fool’s words derives from the fact that they indirectly refer to Divine Truth that characters cannot easily perceive in “ordinary words”:

But these words can encompass the truth in their fashion, on the right tongue. Their inability to declare the truth directly gives them licence to sing about it obliquely, and to glance towards it crookedly, as the hidden meaning, the irony, in the joke. The ultimate personification of this appears again in *King Lear*, as the Fool. His paradoxes and riddles are the only communication possible for Cordelia’s (the heart’s) banished, speechless truth – until Cordelia herself appears in person. (278)

The complementary nature of the characters of Cordelia and the Fool can also be revealed with the help of textual correspondences. Similarly to Cordelia, who clearly rejects the idea of flattery and lying, the Fool refuses to say to Lear what would please him to hear and, instead, speaks what he feels Lear needs to hear: “prethe Nunckle keepe a schoolmaster that can teach thy foole to lye. I would faine learne lye” (Shakespeare sig. D1r.). The audience can also witness how close these two figures stand in Lear’s mind when he cries out over Cordelia’s body: “my poore foole is handg” (Shakespeare sig. L4r.).

The organic point of view allows for assigning to him the position of the tongue of the body politic since he tries to protect the unity of the kingdom by confronting the head with the events that he sets out. Similarly to the other governors, the function of the tongue is to enforce justice and act the role of a physician if the body of the community is injured. And this is the aspect that a gentleman replying to Kent’s



question highlights by saying that the Fool “labours to out-iest” the King’s “heart strooke iniuries” (Shakespeare sig. F3v.).

As for Lear’s ungrateful elder daughters, the text of the play from the beginning connects the organs of feeding and digesting to their characters. After Cordelia’s statement of love, the king settles her portion of territory with the following words: “my two daughters dower digest this third” (Shakespeare sig. B2v.). Later on, these two daughters are supposed to be responsible for providing Lear with food, but they find the way to conveniently neglect this obligation, and when the king realizes their intentions he again recalls images of digestion. First, he calls Oswald, Gonorill’s servant as “a pestilent gull to mee” (Shakespeare sig. C4v.) then metaphorically connects Gonorill to this organ as well: “O most small fault, how vgly did’st thou in *Cordelia* shewe, that like an engine wrencht my frame of nature from the fixt place; drew from heart all loue and added to the gall” (Shakespeare sig. D2r.). Moreover, when he curses her reproductive organs, he regards her future baby as the “childe of spleene” (Shakespeare sig. D2r.). The most often remembered parts of Regan’s body are her nails: first Lear warns Gonorill, referring to Regan as “when she shall heare this of thee, with her nailes shee’l flea thy woluish visage” (Shakespeare sig. D2v.), and later protecting the king Gloster confronts her with the words: “I would not see thy cruell nayles / Pluck out his poore old eyes” (Shakespeare sig. H1v.). Although the image of nails primarily connotes cruelty, the Renaissance scientist regarded this part of the body as the digestive system’s own excrement (Schoenfeldt 245). Nevertheless, before dying Regan directly evokes the image of the belly when she attacks her sister, saying: “Lady, I am not well; els I should answere / From a full flowing stomack” (Shakespeare sig. L1r.).

In the organic conception of state, the financial officers take the position of the organs of digestions, especially that of the stomach, which is also the potential cradle of all illnesses:

Financial officers and keepers may be compared with the stomach and intestines, which, if they become congested through excessive avidity, and retain too tenaciously their accumulations, generate innumerable and incurable diseases, so that through their ailment the whole body is threatened with destruction. (John of Salisbury 65)

Correspondingly, in *King Lear* Regan and Gonorill behave as if they were insatiable financial officers whose task would be to provide Lear with food and shelter but whose greed and desire for power cause both Lear’s madness and Gloster’s blindness, the physical maladies of the plot. Besides the allusions to digestion and the lower parts of the body, the text often applies animal imagery, especially the attribute of a fiend, to the description of Gonorill and Regan. However, these images seem to complement each other as occurs in the passage that Lear cries out when he meets Gloster: “fichew nor the soyled horse goes toot with a more riotous appetite, down frō the wast tha’re centaures, though women all aboue, but to the girdle doe the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiends, thers hell, thers darknesse, ther’s the sulphury pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption” (Shakespeare sig. I3v.).

As regards their position in the social hierarchy, Gloster's two sons—Edgar, who appears mostly in the guise of an outcast, and Edmund the Bastard—are positioned at the feet of the body politic. Albert Rolls sees the two brothers' career in the play as "connected to their sympathetic relationship to the heads of England's body politic" (252-53). While the bastard Edmund can climb the social ladder in Regan and Gonorill's commonwealth, Edgar, similarly to Cordelia, becomes an outcast in their system yet regains his status following the demise of the two sisters. Although in the brothers' case the direct organic references are missing, there are many instances that seem to allude to this lower social position. For instance, in his soliloquy at the beginning of the play, the Bastard openly articulates his rejection of "customs" representing social order and obedience as a subject, instead swearing loyalty to "nature." Without defining what he exactly means by "nature," it is worth noticing that his self-perception is strongly connected to the image of "baseness," denoting not only a moral quality but also a social position. What drives his deeds is not hatred against the others but his selfish need for land: "well the legitimate *Edgar*, I must haue your land, our Fathers loue is to the bastard *Edmund*, as to the legitimate ... *Edmund* the base shall top th'legitimate" (Shakespeare sig. C1r.). His words reveal here that although he rejects custom, he imagines his own prosperity as a vertical movement up the social ladder. Based on one of Gonorill's statements, "My foote usurps my body" in the Quarto, Peter Stallybrass also comments that Edmund's character might represent the foot of the body politic (318-19). In this role, he even recalls the Biblical image of the foot: that rebellion against being the foot engenders chaos in Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Obviously, the anthropomorphic mapping of characters described above does not explain all the aspects of the semantic complexity of the body-related images of the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto. Neither should it be regarded as a perfectly balanced systematic correspondence between the early modern social hierarchy and the characters of the play. Yet it may enrich the reading of the text by pointing out that some of its corporeal images are context-dependent and thus poetically motivated by the socio-political discourses of the early modern period.

## The Disintegration of King Lear's Body Politic

By regarding the hierarchical social order in terms of the organic analogy that the text of the play evokes, Lear's decision to retire, or, to recall his words, "to shake all cares and busines of our state; / Confirming them on yonger years" (Shakespeare sig. B1v.), appears in a different interpretive light. According to the organic conception of the state, every member of the commonwealth, similarly to the organs of a human body, is mutually dependent on the others, and the body functions perfectly only if every part performs its duties for the benefit of the whole. Thus, when Lear resigns from the government of the kingdom, he upsets the delicate balance of the body politic and triggers off the series of events that leads to the decline of the metaphorical body of the state. First, he dislocates himself, the head; shortly afterwards he banishes Cordelia, the

symbolic heart, and also Kent, the eye. As the action of the play proceeds, the audience witnesses the disintegration of the whole organism: Gonorill and Regan, the organs of digestion, deprive Lear of his official companions, the train of knights, and later, even the Fool disappears without any reason. Gloster, as a governor corresponding either to the ear or the eye of the body politic, loses not only his physical sight, but also his property and social rank. His legitimate son, Edgar becomes socially marginalized for the major part of the play. Even Lear's daughters and Edmund, the Bastard die at the end, leaving the stage covered with the corpses of the royal family, and creating a vision of the complete destruction of Lear's body politic.

The text of the play presents the decline of this organic system with the help of an image cluster that compares the state with an unhealthy and declining body. Caroline Spurgeon points out that Shakespeare tends to present the state facing disturbances as a human body covered with tumors or ulcers. The image of "the kingdom ... sick with civil blows" (133) first appears in his history plays and its context implies the idea that the members are responsible for the sickness of the body. This imagery, frequently appearing in public discourses of English political thought during the sixteenth century, ultimately derives from John of Salisbury's *Polieraticus* in which John of Salisbury applies the metaphor of sickness to describe disobedience to the monarch:

An injury to the head, as we have said above, is brought home to all members, and that wound unjustly inflicted on any member tends to the injury of the head. Furthermore whatsoever is attempted foully and with malice against the head, or corporate community, of the members, is a crime of the greatest gravity and nearest to sacrilege. (259)

Various metaphors referring to the diseased body politic, "disease," "foulness," "boils," "sore," "injury," or "wound," also appear in *King Lear*, and, in accordance with John of Salisbury's description, they describe offences committed against Lear. For instance, Kent warns Lear of the consequences of his decision to banish Cordelia from his kingdom with the following words: "kill thy Physicion, / And the fee bestow vpon thy foule disease" (Shakespeare sig. B3r.). Then Cordelia states clearly that the reason why Lear disowns her does not result from an attack against the King: "It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulnes, / No vncleane action or dishonourd step / That hath depriu'd me of your grace and fauour" (Shakespeare sig. B4r.). After Gonorill manifestly opposes Lear's wishes, the King describes his daughter as: "a disease that lies within my flesh, / Which I must needs call mine, thou art a bile, / A plague sore, an imbossed carbuncle in my / Corrupted blod" (Shakespeare sig. F2r.). One of the most striking examples for the metaphorical connection of sickness and the state emerges when Lear not only recognizes Gonorill's and Regan's pretence, but also immediately understands his own error of judgment and its consequences, saying: "I'll forbear; / And am fallen out with my more headier will, / To take the indisposed and sickly fit / For the sound man. Death on my state" (Shakespeare sig. F1r.!) Last but not least, after Lear dies at the very end of the play Albany invests the rule of the country to Edgar and Kent, to "the goard state sustaine" (Shakespeare sig. L4r.).

## Conclusion

The study of the representation of the early modern body politic in *King Lear* contributes to the description of the playwright's poetic practice as it displays the characters in the context of contemporaneous governance theories. Applying the "King's two bodies" concept, Mary Axton explains Lear's tragic error as the misinterpretation of his own role since he treats public affairs as if he had only a "body natural" and disregards the monarch's responsibility for the "body politic." As opposed to Gloster, his mistaken judgment of his children leads to more serious consequences and starts off a series of events that finally results in the destruction of his state. Extending the scope of research to the "organic conception of the state" and combining it with the study of body-related images, this paper has offered an anthropomorphic mapping of Lear's relation to the other characters. The body-related image cluster that the text attributes to various characters corresponds to the analogical social structure of the body politic most comprehensively discussed in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, a work well-known even to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Focusing on one of the figurative layers of the text, the paper has ultimately described King Lear's fall from power as the result of the disintegration of his body politic. From a poetical point of view this decay appears in *King Lear* in the form of various textual references to the sick body of the state, an imagery that ultimately derives from the anthropomorphic analogy permeating early Jacobean public discourses.

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