

WHAT BECOMES OF THE BROKEN-HEARTED: *KING LEAR* AND THE DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY

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In *A Dictionary of English Folklore*, Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud cite William of Newburgh's account of the case of an active corpse which surfaced in Alnwick (Northumberland) in 1196. This corpse emerged nightly from its grave to roam the streets, corrupting the air with 'pestiferous breath' and bringing plague. Two men dug up the corpse and found it closer to the earth's surface than expected. They hit the corpse with a spade and from the wound gushed 'such a stream of blood that it might have been taken for a leech (*sanguisuga*) filled with the blood of many people'. So they tore the heart out, dragged the body away, and burnt it, thus, according to folklore, putting an end to the plague.¹ Simpson and Roud cite this story as evidence of a specifically English folklore of vampires. There is some distance to be travelled from the twelfth century imagination of the heart to the twenty-first century imagination of television dramas like *Casualty* and *Buffy the Vampire-slayer*, but such poetics of the heart suggest powerful social illusions at work in representations linking the body and its disturbed spirits to corpses, death and the soul. Television hospital dramas such as BBC's *Casualty* provide a contemporary rhetoric of symptoms and cardiac treatments through apparently realist representations of medical treatments, even if such representations are largely a stage for emotional dramatizations of the heart. The US television series *Buffy the Vampire-slayer*, by contrast, dramatizes some of the allegorical potential in mythologies of the bloodless soul. The programme's darkly comic telling of the triumph of good over evil nevertheless presumes an ironic

distance from anything approaching a scientific investigation into the heart. The gulf between rational biology and myth is played with rather than experienced as a crisis, suggesting a dissociation of sensibility between the resources of dramatic realism and those of mythic or allegorical representations of evil and poetic justice.

A report from the court of Queen Elizabeth suggests that things were not so easily dissociated in the world of Shakespeare. In 1599 one of Queen Elizabeth's maids of honour called Margaret Radcliffe died, apparently heart-broken and grief-stricken, after the death of four of her brothers within a matter of months, two slain in Ireland, and two from fever. Her premature death aroused curiosity and a letter by Philip Gawdy provides the following account of how her death was received:

Ther is newes besydes of the tragycall death of Mrs. Ratcliffe, the mayde of honor who euer synce the death of S^r Alexander her brother hathe pined in suche straunge manner, as voluntarily she hathe gone about to starue her selfe and by the two dayes together hathe receuyed no sustinaunce, whiche meeting withe extreame greife hathe made an ende of her mayden modest dayes at Richmond vppon Saterdaye last, her Ma^{tie} being present, who commaunded her body to be opened and founde it all

¹ See the entry 'vampires' in Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford, 2000), p. 374. The source of this story is William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (c. 1200), book v, chapter 24, translated by Joseph Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, volume iv (London, 1861). The text is available on-line at: <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/williamofnewburgh-five.html#24>>

well and sounde, sauing certeyne stringes striped all ouer her harte. All the maydes euer synce haue gone in blacke. I saw it my selfe at court.²

Margaret Radcliffe's death prompted a brief, acrostic elegy from Ben Jonson.³ Resonances of this remarkable dissection could also be traced through other poems from the period, such as John Donne's poem 'The Dampe', which begins:

When I am dead, and Doctors know not why,
And my friends curiositie
Will haue me cut up to suruay each part,
When they shall finde your Picture in my heart . . .⁴

As if to test the late Petrarchan poetic conceit of a broken heart, it seems that Queen Elizabeth ordered a dissection of Margaret Radcliffe's body to see if some natural form or cause could be found to explain her seemingly unnatural death from a broken heart. As Michael Neill comments: 'If someone suspected suicide, they were disappointed, for the body bore no trace of poison; instead they found what must have seemed like incontrovertible evidence of a broken heart, physical proof of an emotional crisis whose status normally hovered between metaphor and medical fact.'⁵ Even now, within modern scientific objectifications of the body, it is open to question how far a clear distinction can be drawn between medical 'facts' and emotional conditions.⁶ For the court of Elizabeth there was a significant gulf between the anatomy of physical heart-strings and the anatomy of the soul. Dark hopes are invested in the ability of the emergent theatre of dissection and medical experiment to provide better answers than the theatre or poetry of love.⁷

An echo of Margaret Radcliffe's anatomical fate can be heard in *King Lear* when Lear declares: 'Then let them Anatomize *Regan*: See what breeds about her heart? Is there any cause in Nature that makes these hard-hearts?' (*King Lear* 3.6.34–6)⁸ But the status of Lear's own heart is perhaps even more interesting. The hardness of Lear's heart seems to complement the blindness of Gloucester, as if to illustrate Jesus' quotation from Isaiah in the gospel of St John: 'he hath blinded their eyes and hardened

their herte that they shulde not se with their eyes and lest they shulde vnderstande with their herte.'⁹ But what might a post-mortem reveal if the anatomists were allowed to get their hands

² Quoted from E. K. Chambers, 'The Court', *Shakespeare's England*, eds. various (Oxford, 1917), 2 vols, vol. 1, pp. 79–111 (p. 87). See I. H. Jeayes, ed., *Letters of Philip Gawdy* (London, 1906), p. 103. For discussion see Michael Neill, '“What Strange Riddle's This?” Deciphering 'Tis Pity She's a Whore', in Michael Neill, ed., *John Ford: Critical Re-visions* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 153–79; and Michael Neill, 'New Light on "The Truth" in *The Broken Heart*', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 22 (1975), 249–50.

³ See 'On Margaret Radcliffe', *Ben Jonson: Poems*, ed. Ian Donaldson (London, 1975), p. 24.

⁴ John Donne, 'The Dampe', *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford, 1929), p. 57.

⁵ Neill, '“What Strange Riddle's This?”', 156. See also Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford, 1997).

⁶ For a challenging discussion of the separation between medicine and spiritual healing see Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (London, 1995).

⁷ For a broader discussion of anatomy and dissection see Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York, 1995). See also Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body* (London, 1984).

⁸ A reading from *The Norton Facsimile of the First Folio of Shakespeare*, ed. Charles Hinman (New York and London, 1996), 2nd edition, p. 807, 2033–5. The first Quarto text reads: 'Then let them anatomize *Regan*, see what breeds about her / Hart is there any cause in nature that makes this hardnes'. *King Lear* Q1 (1608), *Shakespeare's Plays in Quarto: A Facsimile Edition*, eds. Michael J. B. Allen and Kenneth Muir (Berkeley, 1981), p. 687. Subsequent references to Shakespeare's plays are readings taken from these facsimile editions, although line references are supplied, for convenience, from the Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor Oxford edition, referring, for *King Lear*, to their edited text of the Folio edition.

⁹ *St John* 12:40 quoted from Cranmer's 1539 translation, *The English Hexapla: Exhibiting the Six Important English Translations of the New Testament Scriptures* (London, 1841). Jesus appears to be quoting the lines from *Isaiah* v1, 10, which the authorized version translates as 'Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart.' *The New English Bible* translates these lines as 'This people's wits are dulled, / their ears are deafened and their eyes blinded, / so that they cannot see with their eyes / nor listen with their ears / nor understand with their wits.' The shift to wits points to the difficulty of translating hearts.

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on Lear's heart? There is something inappropriate about imagining such a response to Lear's death, as if a literal-minded resistance to the play were incapable of recognizing the body's physical conditions as embodiments of more spiritual sufferings. And yet, as I hope to suggest, the play's dramatization of tragical death reveals how an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience might associate tragic poetics with medical diagnosis in ways that create difficulties for modern performers and audiences. Related to such associations there are a range of surprisingly awkward and unanswered questions about the status of the actor's bodies at the end of *King Lear*. These questions open out into historical questions about the conventions of stage death, the biological and medical understandings of death and the tragic dramatization of the causes of death. Recent critical debates have focused on the textual problems of *King Lear*.¹⁰ These debates are important for an understanding of the textual variants in different versions of the end of *King Lear*. This essay, however, suggests ways in which implicit directions for performance and the implied staging of the actor's body need to be analysed, not least if we are to make sense of *King Lear* for modern performance. The already unstable play-text needs to be read with an eye for the implied physical actions of the actor's body, and for the modes of gestural implicature which establish tensions between the actor's body and the body of the role being performed. The difficulty of sustaining a dramatic relation between the actor and the emotional state of the roles being played makes *King Lear* a particularly acute illustration of Diderot's paradox.

How, then, does Lear die? How does the play dramatize the causes of his death? In the Folio text there are a number of suggestive stage directions. The Quarto's direction 'The bodies of Gonerill and Regan are brought in' becomes, in the Folio text, 'Gonerill and Regans bodies brought out' (5.3.206). Both Quarto and Folio texts have the direction, 'Enter Lear with Cordelia in his armes' (5.3.231). As John Jones observes, editors have tended to interpolate the word 'dead' after Cordelia's name in one of the more famous stage directions in world drama, but Shakespeare's early

audiences did not know she was dead any more than Lear himself is sure.¹¹ The tendency of editors to overplay their hand in attempting to explicate the text undermines the purposeful ambiguity of Cordelia's entrance. While the status of stage directions is difficult to assess, both these directions are unusual and unusually important for the staging of the scene. It seems at least plausible that they are an essential part of the way Shakespeare conceived and wrote the end of the play, or that they provide some record of how the play was staged. Either way, there are practical difficulties amid the disintegration of anything approaching funeral pomp in the scene's unravelling. The actors playing Goneril and Regan also have the unenviable task of being dragged on while pretending to be dead. It is hard enough to avoid appearing ridiculous when called upon to die on stage, but there is a peculiar challenge in being brought on stage and then made to play dead. Audiences are often amused by signs of life in actors playing dead. To illustrate the problem, the stage manager's reports for Nicholas Hytner's RSC production note that at the Barbican performance on 6 May 1991: 'Miss Kohler had a recurring cough. Penny Jones played the dead Goneril to save her the discomfort of stifling her coughs.'¹²

It is usually hard enough to get dead bodies off the stage and no practical dramatist would bring dead bodies back onto the stage unless an important point were being made. It is even harder, however, to carry an actor on to the stage in your arms. The image of the three sisters back on stage, united again in death for the first time since the beginning

¹⁰ The debates rumble on from P. W. K. Stone, *The Textual History of King Lear* (London, 1980); Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Texts of 'King Lear' and their Origins*, i. *Nicholas Okes and the First Quarto* (Cambridge, 1982); and, Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, eds., *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of 'King Lear'* (Oxford, 1983). For a succinct account, see John Jones, *Shakespeare at Work* (Oxford, 1995).

¹¹ Jones, *Shakespeare at Work*, p. 234. Compare the commentary in *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Walton-on-Thames, 1997), p. 385.

¹² I am grateful to Pascale Aebischer's research for unearthing this illustration of corpses and corpsing.

of the play, makes plain the consequences of Lear's initial rejection of Cordelia. It is possible, for example, to block the staging of the three sisters to echo their positions in the opening scene. But this tragic tableau is fraught with difficulties. The actor playing Lear needs, for example, to be strong enough to bring on the body of Cordelia if his entrance is not to appear clumsy. Similar difficulties are evident in the stage business and 'heavy sight' (4.16.42) of Antony's dying body being hoisted aloft in Act 4 of *Antony and Cleopatra*.¹³ Various solutions can be found for coping with the weight of Cordelia's body, but performance history suggests that much of the effect of this scene depends on Lear's display of physical strength in his final hour. Even on a relatively small stage, however, it is a considerable physical feat to carry a body across the stage in a manner which does not leave the actor purple in the face and out of breath for his ensuing lines. Modern editors, such as Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, have helped the actor playing Lear by inserting a stage direction to indicate that Lear puts Cordelia's body down between saying 'She's dead as earth' and 'Lend me a Looking-glasse' (5.3.236), as if to indicate the moment when Lear needs his hands free. But even the fittest of actors might worry about the physical demands of the gestures involved. The line 'O your are men of stones' (5.3.232) takes on a rather different sense if the effect is to illustrate the way in which those on stage do not come to Lear's assistance to relieve him of the weight he is carrying.

Scholars have tended to assume that this part was written for Richard Burbage and, if so, Burbage would have been about forty-two when *King Lear* was performed before James I on the 26 December 1606. Perhaps Shakespeare wrote this direction knowing that Burbage would be strong enough to carry on the body of the boy playing Cordelia. The effect seems not to have been repeated until Edmund Kean: 'When Edmund Kean, with a great deal of courage, decided to be the first to restore the death scene to the Tate version he moved awkwardly, short as he was, carrying his Cordelia, and some among the audience were amused.'¹⁴ As Marvin Rosenberg reveals, some curious practical

solutions have been found: 'Gielgud's portage was easier with a concealed sling which made it seem that he carried her on one arm. This was one of Granville-Barker's favorite inventions to give Lear the appearance of massive strength . . .'¹⁵ The significance of this strength was given a suitably resonant dramatic weight by Paul Scofield, eliciting Rosenberg's somewhat romanticized description: 'Scofield yielded a sense of the inward suffering that carried through from iv, vi; outwardly on his hard frame the blows that sagged him slightly seemed more psychic than physical, the bludgeoning of despair. . . .'¹⁶ The gap between the psychic and physical emerges as an important performance parameter for the possibilities of gestural implicature afforded by this playtext. If the moment were written for a strong Burbage, capable of carrying a boy actor with ease, then the moment only becomes difficult for subsequent actors if they lack Burbage's strength. Assuming that these practical staging dynamics are integral to the scene, however, why might Shakespeare stress physicality at such an important moment?

On internal evidence the fictional Lear is in his eighties, or 'four-score and upward' (4.6.54). The actor needs accordingly to establish an awkward relation between his own strength and the considerable strength of the aged Lear. The staging of this moment defines the casting for the play of a strong but ancient Lear against a featherweight Cordelia. Indeed, any actor hoping to play the part has to reckon how old they can be to suggest an appropriately ancient frame before they are themselves too ancient to play the part. The actor has

¹³ Recent attempts to recreate original staging conditions have yet to resolve how this scene might have worked. At the performance I attended of Mark Rylance's production at the new London Globe in 1998 the audience applauded the physical achievement involved in raising Antony into the gallery, such that the line 'Heere's sport indeede: / How heauy weighes my lord?' (4.16.33) became an occasion for comedy.

¹⁴ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Newark, 1972), p. 311.

¹⁵ Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear*, p. 311.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

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to relinquish the crown of theatrical possibility before theatrical mortality catches up with them. Paul Scofield, perhaps the most remarkable of modern Lears, played the role in Peter Brook's production while, like Burbage, in his forties. This points to the importance of Lear's physical strength despite his years. Perhaps Shakespeare's concern is to show that the Lear of Act 5 is still physically strong, despite his advanced age, and despite all that he has gone through, including the weakness of his ruined body and mind in Act 4. This is emphasized by Lear's revelation, confirmed by a gentleman, that he has killed the slave that was hanging Cordelia. As Lily B. Campbell has suggested, Lear remains enslaved to his passions and wrath.¹⁷ To the end Lear is wracked by the violence of his passions, passions that finally overcome him, even if it is a wonder that he endures so much. His physical actions suggest that after all he has been through, Lear has still failed to become patient. Indications that he still has a powerful body to support his powerful passions dramatize the heroic stature of Lear's renewed strength, adding pathos to his emotional state in his final moments. The audience might also be made aware that Lear need not have resigned his kingdom for want of physical strength. In this sense, the play makes it clear that Lear does not die because his flesh is weak while his mind is still strong. Rather the reverse, Lear's flesh is shown to be heroically strong, while his mind or heart is broken.

If the strength needed to carry Cordelia makes getting out of breath a difficulty for the actor playing Lear, this scene is also difficult for the actor playing Cordelia. The business of the looking glass and the feather, however fictionally or imaginatively staged, threatens to reveal that the actor playing Cordelia is alive. As with the part of Lear, the playwright involves a difficult identification between the actor playing Cordelia and Cordelia's fictional body. The scene might descend into farce if Lear pursues his inquiry so vigorously that it becomes evident that Cordelia is indeed still breathing. The stage business turns this risk into a dramatic effect, by dramatizing the uncertainty as to whether Cordelia is dead. It is possible that she may come back to life, as many an audience have wished, if

only for one last moment of poignant speech and brief resurrection before subsiding. Desdemona, for example, rises from her seeming death for a few last words in which, even in death, she confirms her true innocence as a wife, attempting to absolve Othello by saying that nobody but herself has committed murder. A comparable pathos of innocence, guilt and forgiveness might be drawn out if Cordelia were resurrected to utter a few last words. Stranger things happen in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. The staging of Mercutio's death in *Romeo and Juliet* emphasizes the shocking reality of death amid what at first seems a mere scratch. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet also emphasize the ambiguity of stage corpses and their ability to come alive. In the final act of Webster's *The White Devil* Flamineo 'riseth' to reveal that the pistols with which he has been shot 'held no bullets' (5.6.148–9). Even when he is finally killed by sword wounds he manages 'to recover like a spent taper' (5.6.262) for his final speech. Elsewhere Bottom's performance of the death of Pyramus suggests the potential comedy of over-acted stage deaths. The dramatic effects possible when an actor on stage might appear to be playing dead are also evident in *2 Henry IV*, when Prince Henry, not usually rash or unobservant, prematurely tries on the crown, having observed that: 'by his Gates of breath, / There lyes a downey feather which stirres not: / Did hee suspire, that light and weightlesse dowlne / Perforce must moue' (4.3.162–5). In both this moment and in *King Lear*, the motionless feather is staged as a theatrical illusion that highlights the difference between the living actor and the acted corpse. Given that Shakespeare has altered his sources to kill off Cordelia it is possible that some among his audience imagined that Cordelia would indeed live. The audience is made to share Lear's uncertainty and his desire that Cordelia might live. This uncertainty has the added advantage of stopping the prospect of physical farce from over-determining the scene's

¹⁷ Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge, 1930), especially chapter 14, 'King Lear: A Tragedy of Wrath in Old Age', pp. 175–207.

pathos by making the artificiality of the theatrical illusion into a dramatic ambiguity. A similar effect and uncertain diagnosis is dramatized in the mutual death scene of *Romeo and Juliet*: any sign that the actors playing Romeo or Juliet are merely pretending to be dead simply adds to the pathos of their potential to wake up in time or to come alive.

If we apply the drama of uncertain death to Lear himself, however, a rather different picture emerges. In the Folio version Lear's last words are 'Do you see this? Looke on her? Looke her lips, / Look there, looke there' (5.3.286–7). While attention is perhaps focused on Cordelia's lips or on Lear's hands, Lear dies. The stage direction '*He dis.*' (sic), perhaps indicates a relatively sudden death, with his dying drawn out over his vocal repetitions. This effect is perhaps paralleled by the repeated death groans of 'O, o, o, o' in the Quarto text, groans comparable to those of the dying Hamlet in the Folio text. In the Quarto text of *King Lear*, however, Lear's final line is 'Breake hart, I prethe breake', and this suggests a different way of performing Lear's last moment. Having been trained earlier in the scene to see how death on stage can be ambiguous, the responses of Edgar and Kent suggest a rapid shift from the possibility that he has merely fainted towards the wish that he would be better dead than that there might still be life or breath in him. Against Edgar's remarks 'He faints, my Lord, my Lord.' and 'Looke vp my Lord', Kent pleads for Lear's heart to let him die: saying first 'Breake heart, I prythee breake' (5.3.288) and then 'Vex not his ghost, O let him passe, he hates him, / that would vpon the wracke of this tough world / Stretch him out longer.' To which Edgar replies 'He is gon indeed' (5.3.287–91). These lines overcome the possibility that the audience might imagine that Lear has merely fainted. Moreover, Kent's line 'Breake heart, I prythee break' echoes an earlier interchange in which Lear asks Kent 'Wilt breake my heart?' to which Kent replies: 'I had rather breake mine owne' (3.4.4–5). But to what or whom is Kent's plea 'Breake heart, I prythee break' directed? Is it implied that Kent is calling on Lear's flesh to release Lear's soul? Or is Kent calling on Lear to give up his ghost, to let himself go into

death? It might even be argued that he calls on his own heart to break, wishing for a journey into death. The situation is further complicated by returning to the Quarto text, which ascribes 'Break hart, I prethe break' to Lear himself, as if Lear were calling on his own heart to break, somehow willing his own disintegration and dissociation of sensibilities.

There is much that is ambiguous, moreover, in the lines which lead up to the moment of Lear's death.¹⁸ Lear's line 'Pray you vndo this Button' (5.3.285) for example, can be performed to suggest a variety of states of mind immediately prior to Lear's death. Many actors have performed this scene with Lear in dishevelled costumes, with no top button to undo. Accordingly, the line has been performed as if Lear is out of his mind and gestures to an imaginary button which somehow holds his spirit within his body. Performed thus it is as if he were asking for his ghost to be allowed to pass out of his body or as if he were afflicted by another attack of the 'mother' or 'hysterica passio' (2.2.231–2). The line has also been performed to refer to a button on Cordelia's clothing, such that Lear is trying to allow Cordelia to breathe and sees that her clothing is constricting her breathing. This interpretation is somewhat implausible if we remember that Cordelia has been hanged. It is usual to bare the neck when hanging someone rather than allowing their dress to interfere with the processes of execution, and the scene is often staged with signs of rope burn around Cordelia's neck. If Lear is calling for his own button to be undone, this suggests that Lear needs to be dressed with some kind of buttoned up shirt, rather than being dressed as a dishevelled prisoner of war. In a number of recent productions

¹⁸ Ingenious commentaries are offered by a number of editors of the play. Discussion of the button can be found in Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* and in Philip C. McGuire, 'Open Silences and the Ending(s) of *King Lear*', *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silence* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 97–121. See also Nicholas Brooke, 'The Ending of *King Lear*', *Shakespeare 1564–1964*, ed. Edward A. Bloom (Providence, Rhode Island, 1964), pp. 71–87; and John Shaw, 'King Lear: The Final Lines', *Essays in Criticism*, 16 (July 1966), 261–7.

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the implication of the need to unbutton Lear's shirt has been staged as if Lear were experiencing something rising in his gorge or as if suffering the onset of a cardiac arrest that necessitates the need to loosen tight clothing. The New Variorum Edition noted the following interpretation:

where any other mind would have confined itself to the single passion of parental despair, Shakespeare contrives to indicate by a gesture the very train of internal physical changes which are causing death. The blood gathering about the heart can no longer be propelled by its enfeebled impulse. Lear, too weak to relieve the impediments of his dress, which he imagines cause the sense of suffocation, asks a bystander to 'undo this button'.¹⁹

This line implies a physical drama, then, perhaps even an implicit stage direction for the costume appropriate for his entrance with Cordelia in his arms. The thematics of fresh and soiled garments confront the social, physical and metaphorical constrictions of clothes.²⁰

Whatever costume decisions are made, the microdrama of this button, whether it is Lear's or Cordelia's, suggests that either Lear or Cordelia might need room for air to breathe. More poetically, it might be that Lear's vital spirit, ghost or blood is trying to release itself. There are pitfalls for a modern audience familiar with the appropriate first aid treatment for someone who faints or someone undergoing a heart attack. The scene surely descends into dark farce if a modern audience begins to imagine that Lear's death is the result of botched first aid in the hands of Edgar and Kent. It is also implausible that Lear dies from the physical exertion of carrying the body of Cordelia on stage, as if paying the price of lifting a heavy weight. The drama of Lear's body in these final moments seems designed to show that Lear does not slip away quietly. His howls and the cry of 'Never never never' (5.3.284) suggest that he dies with considerable strength remaining and with defiance. Indeed, like many a tragic hero, Lear reasserts his tragic status as he loses life by highlighting his heroic strength in death. Put differently, Lear loses tragic status if his death is staged as though he were simply exhausted or as if dying of natural causes. There is

nevertheless a temptation for the modern actor to borrow from the performance rhetoric popularized by hospital dramas to perform Lear's death by clutching his sides as if experiencing cardiac arrest. Most performers and audiences have nevertheless preferred, without too much questioning, to believe that Lear, after a heroic renewal of strength and painful recognition of the consequences of his failed love for Cordelia, dies of a broken heart. Indeed, the choreographed series of signals dramatizing Lear's final moments seem designed to confirm this view, not least Kent's line 'Break heart, I pry-thee breake.' But it is here that the historical specificity of Lear's tragic body emerges. Expressions associated with dying from a broken heart indicate a historical gulf between the performance diagnostics of modern medicine and the poetics of grief-stricken and heart-rending love. If death from a broken heart is not to be confused anachronistically with a heart attack, how can the actor playing Lear perform death to suggest that Lear dies from a broken heart? If a heart attack constitutes a sudden but natural cause of death, what gestures are appropriate to indicate a tragic death from unnatural causes?

Marvin Rosenberg offers a sketch of different ways of performing the play's conclusion through the power of visual imagery at the point where words fail:

Gielgud, dying grandly in joy at his perception of apotheosis in Cordelia; Forrest, frankly hallucinating her reviving, staring vacantly into space; Carnovsky, shocked to death at the horror of Cordelia's stillness . . . Scofield's silent death: sitting bolt upright, his eyes looking into the mystery of things . . . Booth suggested a man afraid,

¹⁹ Ed. Horace Howard Furness, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: King Lear* (New York, 1963) (reprint of the original 1880 edition). Furness quotes *The Quarterly Review* (April, 1833), p. 197.

²⁰ See, for example, Thelma Nelson Greenfield, 'The Clothing Motif in *King Lear*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 5 (1954), 281–6; Dean Frye, 'The Context of Lear's Unbuttoning', *English Literary History*, 32 (1965), 17–31; and Maurice Charney, "'We put fresh garments on him': nakedness and clothes in *King Lear*", in *Some Facets of King Lear*, eds. Rosalie L. Colie and F. T. Flahiff (London, 1974), pp. 77–88.

exhausted by suffering, confronting Cordelia at the end with a dreadful terror, as if in fear not only of what was, but what was to come; he died in the grand style of Forrest, standing suddenly erect, in a final spasm as a king... The physical agony could be spectacular – Mikhoels told how an actor named Zacchoni drew applause when, at the last moment, his beard jerked suddenly, stiffly up, simulating an actual physical death; but the quieter passing could emphasize Lear's release from suffering, the escape from life, as with Macready, who simply sank back...²¹

The most delicate questions of performance involve the extent to which Lear 'wills' his death. If death from a broken heart means that Lear's body is physically strong but that his heart is not strong enough to bear his unnaturally severe burdens of grief, then it is possible to suggest that what is meant by heart is not the physical heart but a metaphorical heart, where heart stands poetically for Lear's heart and soul. If Lear's ghost or spirit leaves the body when he dies, then the breaking of the heart suggests the severing of the relation between physical flesh and the spirit or soul. If death from a broken heart suggests a situation in which Lear's heart, like the rest of his body, is strong and that Lear is, so to speak, big-hearted, then the key question is the relation between Lear's mind and his heart. If Lear's flesh is strong while his mind is weak, then perhaps Lear's mind gives up the ghost. In this sense, it would be Lear's mind rather than his heart which cannot face the weight of grief involved in recognizing that Cordelia has died because of Lear's actions. Unable to face reality, his mind gives up and the resulting strain is too great for the heart to bear. But this comes close to suggesting that Lear dies in a state akin to madness because he cannot face the full consequences of his actions and the workings of fate.

The conventional and somehow more 'tragic' interpretation involves thinking instead that Lear finally gives up the ghost when he realizes that Cordelia is dead, coming to some recognition of the mentally unbearable situation he is in part responsible for. As Lear puts it earlier, 'she liues: if it be so, / It is a chance which do's redeeme all sorrowes / That euer I haue felt' (5.3.240–2). By the

same logic, if she does not live, all the sorrows that Lear has ever felt are faced with the added burden of this fatal chance which has killed Cordelia. There is a delicate balance between suggesting that Lear wills his own death, and that his mind or heart decides that enough is enough; or, alternatively, that it is the combination of mental and physical suffering involved in recognizing his tragic situation which kills him. It is evident, however, that Lear is in some sense strong, but that the situation is too tragic for someone as strong as Lear to endure, and that this defines the extremity undergone by his tragic body.

These different possibilities are difficult to perform. The tragedy is diminished if Lear dies from natural causes, rather than from the unbearable weight of the unnatural causes his body and mind have endured. This poetic and psychologically plausible form is sufficiently determinate for audiences not to have been too bothered by the awkward question of how, poetically *and* medically speaking, it is possible to die from a broken heart. The staging of bodies highlighted by the stage directions indicates how Shakespeare's playtext has succeeded in giving readers and audiences sufficient confidence that Lear does not die of a heart attack due to physical weakness or old age; that he does not commit psychological suicide; and that he doesn't die mad. None of which makes it easy for actors to suggest the metaphor of a broken heart within bodies that are alive and kicking. What are the appropriate gestures? From the perspective of modern medicine, it is possible to question the poetics of death by insisting on some clarification of the play's physiology of the heart. What if the metaphor of the broken heart is understood more literally, as if there were some continuity between broken hearts and heart attacks through which to understand the poetic expression 'broken heart'? Did Shakespeare, for example, believe that it was possible in reality for people to die of a broken heart, or is death from a broken heart a colloquial idiom here given tragic form in ways which

²¹ Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear*, pp. 319–21.

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inadvertently prefigure what has become known as a heart attack? Are heart attacks brought on by natural causes or by the more unnatural extremes of emotional tragedies?

Perhaps the most important internal evidence provided by the Folio text occurs in the lines immediately preceding the bringing on of the dead bodies of Goneril and Regan. Albany says to Edgar: 'Let sorrow split my heart, if euer I / Did hate thee, or thy Father.' (5.3.168–9) Edgar tells Albany how he has known the miseries of his father and says: 'List a breefe tale, / And when 'tis told, O that my heart would burst.' (5.3.173–4) Edgar goes on to tell how Gloucester died: 'But his flaw'd heart / (Alacke too weake the conflict to support) / Twixt two extremes of passion, ioy and greefe, / Burst smilingly' (5.3.188–191). So far as I can trace, Shakespeare nowhere uses the expression 'broken heart' in the poetic sense generally evident in the period, and subsequently evident in John Ford's play *The Broken Heart*. Passages in *King Lear* nevertheless suggest that his poetics of the broken heart involve a conception of the way in which a heart can split, break or burst from the weight of too much grief, and in particular from the dynamic conflict of two extremes of passion, such as joy and grief.

F. David Hoeniger offers some contextual resources for understanding Shakespeare's vocabulary, not least the vocabulary of 'heart-strings', which moves awkwardly between metaphorical strings, like those of a musical instrument whose physical forms are made from guts, and a more literal physiology of the heart. According to Hoeniger, 'The notion that extreme grief makes the heart-strings "crack" occurs especially often in Elizabethan Literature.'²² This conception of heart-strings can be related to Galen's conception of the fibres and bands of the heart.²³ The expression 'heart-strings' is used in various places in Shakespeare's work, including *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Othello*. The breaking of such strings is related to broken hearts. Consider the following lines spoken by King John:

The tackle of my heart, is crack'd and burnt,
And all the shrowds wherewith my life should saile,

Are turned to one thred, one little haire:
My heart hath one poore string to stay it by,
Which holds but till thy newes be vttered,
And then all this thou seest, is but a cold,
And module of confounded royalty.

(*King John* 5.7.52–8)

In *Richard III*, when Elizabeth's rebuke to Richard concludes: 'Harpe on it still shall I, till heart-strings breake', he responds, 'Harpe not on that string, Madam, that is past,' (4.4.295–6), as if to shift from heart-rending physicality to the metaphor of the harpy with only one note. In the Quarto text of *King Lear*, Edgar talks of how 'the strings of life, / Began to cracke' from the power of grief. Hoeniger summarizes the awkward medical evidence by suggesting that:

What Shakespeare does refer to more than once is two quite different notions that likewise were developed during the Middle Ages: the first is that passions like extreme grief, which produce excess of melancholy humor, cause the heart to contract by its cold, so that being in urgent need of blood and spirit, the heart draws them away from the body's extremities and the face grows pale as a result. The other notion is that shortly before death, the blood and spirits rush back into the heart in order to aid it in its battle against the cold.²⁴

These issues are significant in *King Lear*, not least because, as Hoeniger argues, 'Nowhere else in Jacobean drama or the whole of English Renaissance literature is the emotional turmoil leading to madness presented with anything like the seriousness and understanding Shakespeare shows in *King Lear*.'²⁵ In the light of Lear's references to his heart and 'hysterica passio' Hoeniger amplifies his claim regarding Shakespeare's specific emphasis on medical conditions in *King Lear* by suggesting that: 'These are not, like the passage previously discussed, metaphorical statements, and the

²² F. David Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance* (London and Toronto, 1992), p. 146.

²³ See for example, Charles Singer, *Galen on Anatomical Procedures: Translation of the Surviving Books* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 178–9.

²⁴ Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare*, p. 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

commentaries on them by the play's editors prove unsatisfactory . . . Lear alludes to distressing physical sensations. The upset in his emotional state is now accompanied by turmoil and pain in his body.²⁶ The unsatisfactory nature of existing commentary on physical as opposed to metaphorical, metaphysical or psychological symptoms is particularly acute in discussions of the end of *King Lear*.

A plausible interpretation of the dynamics of Lear's death involves the swift oscillation between his joy that Cordelia may still live, and his grief for her death. Although there are similarities between Gloucester and Lear, Gloucester dies despite or perhaps even because of the recognition that Edgar still lives and has been helping him. Lear explicitly states that if Cordelia were to live this might redeem all his sorrows. Two important features of the report of Gloucester's death contrast with Lear's death. Gloucester has been blinded and his heart is flawed and weak, whereas Shakespeare goes to some lengths to suggest that Lear's heart is strong. Gloucester's flawed heart, we are told, 'burst smilingly'. There is much compressed in this remarkable image, combining difficulties already sketched relating mind and grief in the breaking of a heart. Gloucester's sorrow is partially redeemed, and the image 'burst smilingly' suggests both the joining of joy and grief and an identity between physical suffering and Gloucester's emotional state. The suggestion that Gloucester smiles in death suggests a violent death which might nevertheless be reconciled with death from natural causes. The image seems designed to highlight the greater tragedy of Lear's death from more psychologically internal wounds and in a state of passionate strength. However beautiful the image of a heart that 'burst smilingly', it would be difficult for an actor to perform. The image is best left to the imagination. This is illustrated by the difficulty of staging the end of Ford's play *The Broken Heart*, where the actor playing Calantha somehow has to act sufficient to warrant the description offered by Bassanes of 'her smile in death' (5.3). The actor playing Antony, by comparison, is called on to perform extremes of heart-ache without dying, but is allowed recourse to words rather than gestures to convey his emotional and physical

state on hearing news of Cleopatra's death: 'The seven-fold shield of *Aiæx* cannot keepe / The battery from my heart. Oh cleave my sides. / Heart, once be stronger then thy Continent, / Crack thy fraile Case' (4.15.38–41). Lear himself verbalizes his rages against Regan: 'you thinke Ile weepe, / No, Ile not weepe, I haue full cause of weeping, [*Storme and Tempest.*] But this heart shal break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere Ile weepe; O Foole, I shall go mad.' (2.4.456–9). Lear goes mad rather than weep or let his heart break into a hundred thousand flaws, but in the movement from Act 3 to 5, he comes through madness to reach the point where although he does not weep, his heart nevertheless breaks. Within these intimations of Jacobean physiology, Shakespeare distinguishes how different passions affect the heart. The final breaking of Lear's body reveals not the breaking of a weak heart, but of a tragically strong heart which will not weep.

By way of illustrating medical conceptions of the heart Shakespeare might have known, Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1604) provides the following striking description of the way the imagination sends data to the heart:

[When the imagination conceives the form of some object] by sense or memory . . . convenient or disconvenient to Nature, presently the purer spirits flocke from the brayne by certaine secret channels to the heart, where they pitch at the dore, signifying what an object was presented, conuenient or disconuenient for it. The heart immediately bendeth, either to prosecute it, or to eschew it: and the better to effect that affection, draweth other humours to helpe him, and so in pleasure concurre great store of pure spirits; in paine and sadnesses, much melancholy blood; in ire, blood and choller; and not onely (as I said) the heart draweth, but also the same soule that informeth the heart residing in other parts, sendeth the humours vnto the heart, to performe their seruice in such a worthie place . . .²⁷

Further minor indications in the final scene of *King Lear* suggest that Lear's heart is finally broken as the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

²⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 156.

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passionate conflicts of his soul become too great for his heart. Hoeniger even suggests that his final moments could be diagnosed medically according to Jacobean physiology: 'in persons close to death, the spirit of the eye grows weak, so that the sight becomes dim or fuzzy. Hippocrates already noted that this is a sign of approaching death. Shakespeare alludes to it more than once, notably near the end of *Lear*, when the King, having difficulty recognizing Kent, refers to his "dull sight" and tells him, "Mine eyes are not o'the best".'²⁸ A similar semiotics of dying informs the death of King John, from his declaration that his 'heart is sicke' (5.3.4) to Prince Henry's explanation that: 'the life of all his blood / Is touch'd, corruptibly: and his pure braine / (Which some suppose the soules fraile dwelling house) / Doth by the idle Comments that it makes, / Fore-tell the ending of mortality.' (5.7.1-5). Much of the detailed description of the causes of King John's death can be read into the implied gestures and physicality reworked in the staging of Lear's death.

Understanding the playtexts of *King Lear* involves, then, a careful consideration of the implied acting of the tragic body and Shakespeare's choreography of death. The historically specific condition revealed by analysis is that the play suggests a carefully worked identity between the metaphorical sense of what it means to die of a broken heart and a more literal sense of the breaking of the heart within Elizabethan and Jacobean psychology and medicine. The interactions of body, text and performance cannot be separated without losing sight of the play's dynamics. Moreover, despite the tendency of modern medicine to believe in the objective qualities of diagnosis, this analysis begins to suggest how diagnosis of phenomena such as heart-attacks depends on a performative understanding of the body in which we are trained to recognize gestures as signs. If the body is performative to a degree that is tragic, then there is a kind of poetic theatricality at the heart of medical diagnosis. Theatre in this sense is a condition of the possibility of understanding what a heart-attack is and looks like. Although Shakespeare's tragedy of the body can be read and performed through a

poetics of the tragic body which is psychologically plausible, Shakespeare is also concerned to support the metaphors of psychological drama with a pathology of physical symptoms. These symptoms are part of the way the drama is enacted through the actions of bodies and cannot easily be brought into line with modern medical conceptions, particularly for passions of the mind and affairs of the heart. The historical specificity of the body in Shakespeare's drama poses difficult questions about the viability of the historicizing approaches of modern performance. This begins to suggest how the historical differences of Shakespeare's tragedies have been romanticized by poeticizing and dissociating the sensibilities dramatized by Shakespeare.

Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616. A few days before, on 16, 17 and 18 April, William Harvey gave his first set of lectures setting forth in public his view of the circulation of the blood. Harvey's account of the circulation of the blood was first published in Latin in 1628. His view of blood circulation and the heart as a mechanical pump which pumps blood around the body is broadly the same as that of modern medicine. Harvey's view, however, was initially greeted with considerable scepticism, not least because it overturned traditions of thought which traced their authority back to Galen and Aristotle. Challenges to the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic view of astral bodies suggested by Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo provoked comparable difficulties for the traditions of natural philosophy. Shakespeare appears not to have known of Harvey's work. Their near contemporaneity specifies the way Shakespeare's conception of physiology, especially of the heart and blood, involves a world-view different from those familiar to modern readers and audiences of Shakespeare. 'World-view' here is no exaggeration. Harvey's conception of the circulation of the blood shifted a range of political metaphors associated with the heart and with blood. Harvey, for example, dedicated his work *De Motu Cordis*, to Charles I, and in a translation

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

published in 1653 the opening words declare:

The Heart of creatures is the foundation of life, the Prince of all, the Sun of their Microcosm, on which all vegetation does depend, from whence all vigor and strength does flow. Likewise the King is the foundation of his Kingdoms, and the Sun of his Microcosm, the Heart of his Commonwealth, from whence all power and mercy proceeds . . .²⁹

Four years after the execution of Charles I and seven years before the restoration of monarchy, the relation between king and commonwealth suggests the politically charged metaphors associated with hereditary principles and the physiology of the heart. The political symbolism involved is perhaps most familiar from the fable of the belly in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1.1). As many of Shakespeare's tragedies show, the affairs of a king's heart are affairs of state. The special metaphorical and physical importance of the king's heart is also evident in Queen Elizabeth's famous if apocryphal remark about having the weak and feeble body of a woman, but the heart of a king, by implication the heart of her father Henry VIII. Although a staunch Royalist, Harvey challenged the prevailing scientific ignorance regarding the body, criticising poetic accounts of blood and spirit.³⁰ In *De Circulatione Sanguinis*, translated into English in 1653, Harvey argued, for example:

commonly ignorant persons when they cannot give a reason for any thing, they say presently, that it is done by Spirits, and bring in Spirits as performers in all cases; and like as bad Poets do bring in the gods upon the Scene by head and ears, to make the *Exit* and *Catastrophe* of their play.³¹

Harvey need not have looked far in the drama produced between 1580 up to the closure of the theatres in 1642 for instances where spirits are deployed as mysterious performers within a poetics of the body. The hindsight provided by Harvey highlights important historical dynamics regarding the tragic body in Shakespeare's theatre. Modern conceptions of the blood-stream and heart-attacks were not available to Shakespeare. There is

a significant historical gulf between the imaginary bodies of Shakespearian society and subsequent scientific understandings of the body. Soon after Shakespeare's death, the poetics of the body in Jacobean drama was challenged, not only by the religious lobby, but also by new scientific conceptions of the body, conceptions which brought science and poetry into a conflict from which poetic drama has struggled to survive. Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, for example, takes issue with the medical evidence regarding the death of Cleopatra in a spirit of inquiry which undermines the poetry of the asp.³² The conflict between science and tragic drama might once have informed new ways of understanding the relation between physical and emotional suffering, but the poetics of the body offered by drama has become increasingly subservient to pseudo-scientific rhetoric and diagnosis.

Such problems can seem peripheral to Shakespearian tragedy, but Shakespeare's tragedies look different if the spiritual physiology of the body and its humours is foregrounded. The implied gestural repertoire in *Hamlet* requires some understanding of how Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would have understood the states of mind and body experienced by Hamlet and Ophelia. Medical notions of various kinds are central to many Elizabethan and Jacobean tragic dramas, perhaps most notably in the strange and risky drugs which simulate death in *Romeo and Juliet*. Awkwardly physiological and psychological states of mind and body are central to *Macbeth* involving both Macbeth's

²⁹ William Harvey, *The Anatomical Exercises: De Motu Cordis and De Circulatione Sanguinis in English Translation*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York, 1995), p. vii.

³⁰ For some discussion of Harvey's impact and reception, see Robert G. Frank, 'The Image of Harvey in Commonwealth and Restoration England', *William Harvey and his Age*, ed. Jerome J. Bylebyl (Baltimore and London, 1979), pp. 103–43.

³¹ William Harvey, *The Anatomical Exercises*, p. 155.

³² Thomas Browne, 'Of the Picture Describing the Death of Cleopatra', *Pseudodoxia Epidemica, The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Charles Sayle (Edinburgh, 1927), 3 volumes, vol. 2, pp. 235–6 (Book 5, chapter 12).

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hallucinations and Lady Macbeth's fate. *Julius Caesar* and *Othello* foreground physical states awkwardly analogous with modern conceptions of epilepsy. In *Othello*'s case the unhinging of his mind and body works according to a physiology and psychology which is poetically plausible in terms of jealousy, but for which modern conceptions of psycho-sexual desire are profoundly anachronistic. In most of Shakespeare's tragic dramas, a combination of extreme mental and physical states is endured by the central tragic heroes, states which involve conceptions of the body which are alien to modern medicine. Shakespeare's plays are in part responsible for developing theatrical conventions which make it possible for the tragic body to become a public performance. The trials of kings are dramatized as mental and physical conditions afflicting the body of an actor in a cognitive arena which is also politically charged. The way the drama of the body is rendered plausible for modern audiences allows beliefs in the psychology and physiology of troubled spirits, ghosts and unhinged minds or hearts to be romanticized within poetics of performance and theatricality.

The medical and political dynamics of Shakespeare's playtexts and his dramatization of the tragic body are too often ignored. The specificity of Shakespeare's dramatic purposes can be measured against earlier representations of heart-breaking scenes. Some of the most intriguing dramatic precursors for the dynamics sketched here can be found in the final scene of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, as Amphitryon and Hercules contemplate the heart-rending situation in which Hercules has killed his own children. The terms found for raging and wrathful hearts in Jasper Heywood's translation obscure the shifting physiology of 'pectus' and 'cor'. Amphitryon's cry: 'Ecce quam miserum metu / cor palpitat pectusque sollicitum ferit' (1298–9) becomes 'loe see how leaps with feare afright / My wretched harte, and how it doth my careful body smight'.³³ In the strange world of Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (c. 1569), the literalism of a heart-piercing arrow shot by Cambises is matched by the more metaphorical but no less

lethal arrows of Cupid, a mixture of lamentation and mirth captured in Ambidexter's immortal lines:

A, a, a, a! I cannot chuse but weepe for the queene! / Nothing but mourning now at the court there is seene. / Oh, oh, my hart, my hart! O, my bum will break! / Very greefe so torments me that scarce I can speake. (1133–6).³⁴

The end of the second part of *Tamburlaine* provides more substantive material for comparison, not least through the medical description of Tamburlaine's sickness provided by the Physician:

my lord, this day is Criticall,
Dangerous to those, whose Chrisis is as yours:
Your Artiers which alongst the vaines conuey
The liuely spirits which the heart ingenders
Art partcht and void of spirit, that the soule
Wanting those Organnons by which it mooues,
Can not indure by argument of art.³⁵

Amid talk of bleeding, wounded and broken hearts, Amyras ascends to the chariot, saying lines rich with dramatic, physical and metaphysical ambiguity:

Heauens witnes me, with what a broken hart
And damned spirit I ascend this seat,
And send my soule before my father die,
His anguish and his burning agony.
(4591–4602 / 5.3.206–9)

Marlowe's drama sets the medical against the emotional significance of broken hearts to provoke political and theological reflection. Broken hearts figure in the final moments of many subsequent plays, but by the time of John Ford's plays *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* and *The Broken Heart*, the

³³ Citing the Loeb Classical Library edition, Seneca, *Tragedies* vol. 1, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, 1979); and *Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies*, trans. Thomas Newton (1581) (London and New York, 1927), 2 vols., vol. 1, p. 51.

³⁴ Thomas Preston, *Cambises*, quoted from *Specimens of Pre-Shakespearian Drama*, ed. John Matthews Manly (Boston, 1897), 2 vols., vol. 2, p. 207.

³⁵ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Greate*, the second part, *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. C. F. Tucker Brooke (Oxford, 1910), p. 134, 4483–9. (5.3.91–7 in the Oxford edition edited by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen.)

dramatic components are dissociated to the point of becoming mannered theatrical effects rather than searching provocations. In *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*, the sight of Annabella's heart on a dagger is so mournful as to break the heart of Florio, her father, but the contrast between the stage spectacle of an actual heart and Florio's sudden death from internal wounds lacks the intensity or purpose of *King Lear*. Similarly, at the end of *The Broken Heart*, what appears to be offered as a homage to the pathos of the final moments in *King Lear* comes close to burlesque as the emblematic significance of broken hearts is milked for one too many moral tag. Such moments in Ford nevertheless serve both to suggest the memorable specificity of the final moments of *King Lear* and to indicate how quickly Shakespeare's dramatic association of sensibilities became subject to a logic of dissociation.

What might seem like poetic licence in Shakespeare's tragedies can be understood, accordingly,

as a critical and historical moment in the conflict between theatrical and medical dramatizations of the body and death. The historicity of the tragic body shows how the historical imagination of tragedy dramatizes the body as an embodiment of conflicts between nature and history. Unnatural death provides an allegory of history. Once the body and its physiology are subjected to historical shifts in our knowledge of biology, the human body of the tragic actor can no longer contain the physical and metaphysical extremes of nature and history in the same way. A conflict between poetic justice and scientific realism previously focused on the performance of a breaking heart becomes dissociated. The tragic implications that link this broken heart with the broken family and the broken state are no longer so resonant. This suggests a need for a healthy hermeneutics of suspicion when regarding what is living and dead in the playtexts of Shakespeare.