

THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION

Judit Mudriczki

The 1608 *King Lear* Quarto in Context: Dramatic  
Tradition, Jacobean Rhetoric and the Representation of  
the Early Modern Body Politic

Supervisor: Prof. Tibor Fabiny

Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Faculty of Humanities

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Renaissance English Literature Program

Piliscsaba

2010

## I. Topic and Objectives

The dissertation intends to explore the historical context in which the 1608 Quarto of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* was written and also seeks an answer to the question what makes this drama an outstanding and exceptional work of art compared to the other contemporaneous adaptations of the same story. As both the cover page of the Pied Bull Quarto and the record in the Stationer's Register confirms, the drama was most certainly performed in Whitehall on the stage of the Jacobean court at Christmas, 1606. In order to entertain this courtly audience, the playwright adopted the well-known story of King Lear and his three daughters, which could have been available for him in many versions. But as opposed to the assumedly most immediate source, the anonymous *True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*, a play very popular during Queen Elizabeth's reign, William Shakespeare completely changed the dramaturgical context of the story as well as the character's personality traits and diction. The dissertation focuses on three particular aspects of these changes.

The first chapter examines the macrostructural layer of the text arguing that the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto strongly relies on the Tudor interlude tradition exemplified by John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* and thus contains many elements, for instance the allusions to the wheel of Fortune, the dramaturgical role of the beggar or the doctor, or the

motif of the new garment, that actually derive from the literary convention of the “speculum principis” genre.

The second chapter focuses on the microstructural layer of the text and draws attention to its rhetorical features by offering an interpretive reading of two particular scenes, the love contest and mock trial. In order to provide a distinct terminology and conceptual framework, the chapter juxtaposes these scenes with the description of figurative speech and courtly behavior in George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*, and concludes that these two scenes challenge the early modern understanding of notion of decency. This chapter also reveals that the character’s diction in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is loaded with the tropes of contemporaneous public discourses.

Out of the various topical references, the third chapter targets the body-related image cluster of the play pointing out that it complies with the rhetoric of the Jacobean royal discourse based on the trope of the body politic. Moreover, the chapter also argues that a considerable number of the corporeal allusions in the 1608 Quarto establish the relevance of the organic conception of the state, most memorably known from John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, which allows for what is called the “anthropomorphic mapping” of the characters’ relation to the King.

The three aspects these chapters offer enhance the idea that the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto could be read as a dramatic response to the official royal propaganda, a play that holds a “mirror of governance” to the royal court including the King, who was supposedly present at the Whitehall performance of the play on December 26, 1606.

## II. Approach and Method

Due to the distinctive feature of the various aspects, each chapter adopts a different method in order to reach their research objectives.

The first chapter places William Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the context of dramatic history and offers a double contrast by studying the most immediate textual source, the anonymous *True Chronicle Historie of King Leir* on the one hand, while on the other hand it also juxtaposes the *King Lear* Quarto with John Skelton's *Magnyfycence*. Regardless that Skelton's play was written approximately a hundred years before *King Lear*, its dramatic structure shows a strong similarity with Shakespeare's work. By juxtaposing the Quarto text with two other pieces of drama, the contrastive analysis intends to provide an objective description of the distinct features of Shakespeare's craft.

The second chapter aims at a close reading of the text and pays special attention to two particular scenes whose dramaturgy relies on the transgression of the early modern norms of public speech and descent behavior as they could be reconstructed on the basis of George Puttenham's description. While studying the scene that presents the love confession of Lear's three daughters, the chapter defines rhetorical figures applying the terminology George Puttenham's handbook provides in order to interpret the dramatic characters' diction. The term "diction" refers to the use of language that is specific to a dramatic character and it also determines that character's personality traits. In order to decode the meaning of

figurative language that the courtly etiquette prescribes, the textual analysis uses both some commonplaces the contemporaneous emblem books convey reflecting some general preconceptions of the age and also the relevant tropes and figures that appear in the public discourse set by the speeches of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The term “discourse,” as opposed to diction, signifies the use of language on a societal level in a given historic period predominantly exercised and thus determined by the institutions of authority and power quite independently from the theater. The second chapter of the dissertation argues that one of the distinctive features of the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto is that the characters’ diction abounds in the tropes of contemporaneous public discourses. Moving beyond the frame of the dramatic text, the chapter reveals the semantic complexity of the tropes of the heart and mouth and thus the interpretive crux concerning Cordelia’s line “I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.” For the interpretation of the mock trial scene, the dissertation relies on a relevant chapter in *The Arte of English Poesie* that describes decent behavior. From a dramaturgical point of view that mock trial scene intends to demonstrate that King Lear is mad, or to recall Kent’s words “his wits are gone.” In this scene, however, Lear madness does not manifest itself in the form of passionate outbursts like in the storm scene but in his behavior during the utmost example of a public event, which completely transgresses what George Puttenham describes as courtly etiquette. Therefore the mock trial scene becomes the dramaturgical climax of the plot since it presents the parody of public speech and behavior offering a sharp contrast to

the ceremonial scenes staged at the beginning and end of the play. The comic feature of the scene is also enhanced by such instances of indecency as the presentation of the monarch in the company of a beggar and a fool, the unusual clothing of characters, or their non-referential utterances. Unlike modern adaptations, George Puttenham's handbook draws attention to the fact that for the Renaissance audience indecency was the main source of humor and laughter, and mock trial scene undoubtedly presents all those indecent features that, based on the description in *The Arte of English Poesie*, the 1606 courtly audience most certainly found entertaining.

Out of the many aspects of figurative language, the third chapter focuses on the relation between the corporeal images that permeate the text of the 1608 Quarto and the anthropomorphic theories describing the structure and governance of the "body politic," the early modern metaphor denoting the state. The text of the play describes certain characters with the help of certain recurring images referring to certain body-parts, and these images are also intended to mark the characters' social function. For instance, in the case of Kent, the trope of the eye becomes dominant, which corresponds to the function of the councilor in the social hierarchy. This correspondence, however, is not due to the playwright's genius as an artist. These images of the text are determined by the anthropomorphic understanding of society that had entered English legal thought by John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, a work that even Shakespeare's contemporaries knew. On an abstract, metaphorical level King Lear's fall happens as the result of the disintegration of

his body politic, which provides a poetical motivation for the various textual references to the aching and sick body, an imagery that repeatedly occurs in the play. In the case of the 1608 Quarto, the study of the connection between the corporeal images and the anthropomorphic social and political theories becomes especially significant since the public discourse that James I set intended to justify the monarch's legitimacy by applying the same tropes of rhetoric since the King ascended the throne of England in 1603.

### **III. Academic Context and Achievements**

All the three chapters of the dissertation intend to summarize the latest findings of international Shakespeare scholarship as well as to contribute to the academic discussions on the art of the playwright with some further remarks. Therefore besides finding an answer to the proposed questions, the chapters also include a short overview of the relevant and available secondary literature to present the academic context in which these questions arise.

As for the first chapter, the relation between the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto and the supposedly most direct textual source, the anonymous *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*, has been thoroughly studied most recently, for instance, by Richard Knowles. However, the other textual cornerstone of this juxtaposition, John Skelton's *Magnyfycence*, has never been used for such a detailed and systematic comparison with *King Lear*, which becomes one of the innovations of the dissertation. John Skelton's play is one of those

dramatic pieces of Tudor interludes that presently enjoy an intensified academic interest that emerged in the last two decades and most notably practiced by such well-established scholars as David Bevington, Howard B. Norland, Greg Walker and Peter Happé. Although their field of study focuses on pre-Shakespearean drama, their works introduce an important theatrical background that frames dramatic craft in the early modern period, the traces of which can be still detected in the Shakespearean text. The contrastive reading that the first chapter of the dissertation offers highlights that the 1608 *King Lear* Quarto shares some similarities and differences with both plays. While the wording of Shakespeare's play resembles and occasionally even echoes that of the anonymous play, the striking number of similarities concerning the thematic and motivic elements, for instance the bipolar distribution of the dramatis personae and also their dramaturgical function, suggests that a stronger connection exists between the interlude and Shakespeare's play. The chapter ultimately reaches the conclusion that certain elements of the Shakespearean text most probably derive from the Tudor interlude tradition, which shows the playwright's familiarity with this dramatic heritage. Obviously, this contrastive reading does not reveal the depths of his knowledge and cannot explain how the playwright could have gained this knowledge but it undoubtedly points out the historical dimension of his dramaturgical practice.

The second chapter deals with the practical question of the playwright's use of formal rhetoric and poetics, and also with his familiarity with George Puttenham's book. Both questions are related

to more extensive academic discussions that entered international Shakespeare scholarship as a distinct field of study only in the second half of the twentieth century. The study of the connection between Shakespearean drama and the Renaissance knowledge of formal rhetoric and poetics was initiated by Brian Vickers, Arthur Kinney and Heinrich Plett. These scholars, however, apply the knowledge of rhetorics that derive from many early modern manuals, therefore the method that the second chapter of the dissertation relies on the notions and terminology of only one contemporaneous work becomes a novelty. Although Kenneth Muir hinted at the assumed textual connection between *The Arte of English Poesie* and the Folio version of *King Lear* in the nineteen-sixties, in the case of the Quarto this connection has never been studied.

The focus of the third chapter is related to the field of research known as the history of ideas and ultimately explores the connection between the corporeal or body-related images of *King Lear* and certain Renaissance governance theories on the “body politic,” the metaphorical expression standing for the concept of the early modern state. As in recent decades in academic circles considerable attention has been paid to the early modern knowledge of the body in the physical sense, it seems reasonable to emphasize that this dissertation does not intend to follow the line of thinking set by contemporary scholars like Gail Kern Paster, Michael Schoenfeldt or Jonathan Sawday, who focus their attention on the physiological and psychological aspect of the human body as it was understood in the Renaissance and also on its impact on contemporaneous thinking and

literature. Rather, the dissertation reaches back to another tradition, the figurative reading of the human body, which has been practiced for long centuries in Christian communities especially when discussing the issues of governance or political and divine authority. Although this approach might seem unusual in the first decades of the twenty-first century, yet it does not stand unprecedented in Shakespeare scholarship. The major secondary studies regarding the notion of the “body politic” and its relation to Shakespearean drama were carried out in the works of Ernst Kantorowitz, David George Hale, Mary Axton and most recently Albert Rolls, the last two of whom explicitly focused on the immense importance of the “King’s two bodies” idea to the interpretation of *King Lear*. The bedrock of their studies was Ernst Kantorowitz’s 1957 book *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study of Mediaeval Political Theology*, the tremendous influence of which is felt even today. Both this work and Mary Axton’s *The Queen’s Two Bodies* base their claims on the Elizabethan lawyer, Edward Plowden’s legal reports published in 1588, which seems to be asynchronous in the case of Jacobean texts. Even if he does not discuss *King Lear* in length, Albert Rolls overcomes this shortcoming in his 2000 monograph, *The Theory of the King’s Two Bodies in the Age of Shakespeare*, which extends the scope of research also to Edward Forset’s treaty *A Comparative Discovrse of the Bodies Natvral and Politiqve* published in 1606 after the trial of the conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot. Nevertheless, the novelty of the dissertation is that it also studies the textual presence of the organic conception of the state to provide a more detailed

understanding of *King Lear*. Although David George Hale's book *The Body Politic – a Political Metaphor in Renaissance English Literature* provides a comprehensive summary of the historical and theoretical background, the assumed connection between the anthropomorphic analogy of the state and the body-related metaphors of *King Lear* has never been discussed in Shakespeare scholarship.

#### IV. Relevant Publications

*Az államtest retorikája a Lear királyban.* Filológiai Közlöny 2007/3-4. 217-226.

„Úgy csókolsz, mint a könyvben!” *A könyv, a szonett s Rómeó és Júlia.* Mester és Tanítvány, 2008. 159-170.

*A kormányzás reprezentációja (reneszánsz hatalomelméleti diskurzusok vizuális, nyelvi és térbeli megjelenítése Ambrogio Lorenzetti freskóciklusán a sienai városháza Sala dei Nove termében,* Studia Litteraria, XLVI., Debrecen, 2009. 23–37.

*The Interlude Tradition and Shakespeare's King Lear: A Contrastive Reading of Magnyfycence, King Leir and King Lear.* In: *HUSSE Papers: Literature and Culture*, University of Pécs, Pécs. (forthcoming)

*A beszédes és sima nyelv poétikája – avagy Shakespeare retorikai műveltsége a Lear király első felvonásának tükrében.* In: Radvánszky Anikó (ed.) *Retorika, Literatura, Poétika, Pázmány Irodalmi Műhely – Tanulmányok*, Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem, Piliscsaba. (forthcoming)

*Facing Indecent Textual Discourses: The Mock Trial Scene of Shakespeare's King Lear in the light of George Puttenham's The Arte of English Poesie.* In: Balogné Bérces Katalin, Földváry Kinga, Schandl Veronika (ed.) *Faces of English. Pázmány Papers in English and American Studies.* Volume 5., Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Piliscsaba. (forthcoming)