ABSTRACT

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The Body-Politic in Pieces:
Reflections of the English Succession Crisis through Disjointed Body Parts
in Titus Andronicus, Othello, and King Lear

(Under the direction of Professor Christopher Crosbie)

Early modern authors frequently employed the trope of the corporeal form as a metaphor for the body of government in order to explain how governments should function. Shakespeare, in particular, utilized it to comment on the unrest in the political sphere during and, surprisingly, after the Succession Crisis. Elizabeth’s death, the uncertainty around her succession, and the fears surrounding James’ ability to rule England inform Shakespeare’s use of the discordant body that betrays itself in Titus Andronicus, Othello, and King Lear. Shakespeare comments on this political climate through the specific examples of body parts betraying themselves – depicting the state of chaos in his tragedies as a corporeal disquiet. In Titus Andronicus the use of hands and tongues punctuates Titus and Lavinia’s helplessness to communicate, avenge themselves, or repair their broken country. This impotence confirms the legitimacy of English fears regarding the consequences of a malevolent ruler coming to power as Elizabeth’s successor. Othello, written during the succession of James, demonstrates the vulnerability of outsiders to deception. The body-politic metaphor presents itself in the tainting of the heart through the ear, physically personified in reference to Desdemona’s courtship, Othello’s persuasion of the Senate, and Othello’s ultimate fall from grace through oral deceptions. Lastly, King Lear was penned during King James’ first years in power and the conspiracies he survived. Through Lear’s deposition and the blinding of Gloucester, Shakespeare reflects the period’s concerns with the ineptitude of James’ monarchy. Taken altogether, the disjointed, fragmented bodies in these three plays show us the political troubles of Shakespeare’s England during and, remarkably, after the Succession Crisis.