

Maria Del Sapio Garbero, Nancy Isenberg and Maddalena Pennacchia (eds.), *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome*, Interfacing Science, Literature, and the Humanities, Band 4, V&R Unipress 2010, 388 pp., ISBN 978-3-89971-740-2, hardcover.

Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome results from a synergic cooperation between an ongoing research on "Shakespeare and Rome" coordinated by one of the three editors of this volume, Maria Del Sapio Garbero, and a triennial European project on "Interfacing Science, Literature, and the Humanities" – the Socrates/ETNP ACUME2 program. In line with the interdisciplinary approach fostered by ACUME2 general project, the "Theories of Bodies" sub-project gathered scholars from different countries and different research fields, sharing the attempt to work out an interdisciplinary methodology. All the members of the two research units and other colleagues from both Italian and European universities have then contributed to broaden the framework of their research on the occasion of the Conference held in Rome in February 2008, at Roma Tre University. The convenors of this Conference are the editors of this volume: Maria Del Sapio Garbero, Nancy Isenberg and Maddalena Pennacchia.

As the introduction by Del Sapio Garbero exhaustively explains, this conference proceedings try to reflect on and problematize the human body as a microcosm and as the mirrored image of the macrocosm. In the Elizabethan time, in fact, the human body was considered a hierarchized and interdependent whole of organs and functions reflecting, at the same time, the system which orders all other bodies in the universe.

Due to the coming of an interfacing approach between literature, humanities and science and due also to crucial changes of the European Renaissance episteme, the body seemed not be separated from the world/universe: the human body mirrors all the world around it just as earthly spheres mirror the heavenly ones. John Dee's category of an inclusive science he called «Anthropographie»¹ offers a meaningful example of Renaissance cooperation among *Artes*, that is between science and humanities.

The authors of this volume address Shakespeare's own "anthropographie", turning their attention, in particular, to his so-called Roman plays because ancient Rome has always been considered a summary of City and World, of different cultures, races, forms of government.

Considering the wide geography of Roman Shakespeare², the essays of this volume address the way the different bodies of the earthly and heavenly spheres are conceptualized according to the early modern activity of mapping the shifting borders between traditional humanistic knowledge and the new sciences. Ancient Rome, quoting from Del Sapio Garbero's

introductory essay, «[...] becomes, for Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, a privileged arena in which to question the nature of bodies and the place they hold in a changing order of the universe»³.

The introductory essay starts from a relevant insight into the question of fluctuating borders between traditional humanistic knowledge and the new sciences in the early modern time in order to achieve the main goal of this volume: questioning the bodies in Shakespeare's Roman works, that have all been addressed and discussed by the contributors of this book.

The essays have been divided into two sections, *Human Bodies* and *Earthly and Heavenly Bodies*, almost matching the early modern distinction, underlined before, between micro and macrocosm. In the first section the essayists analyze the problematic role of the human body as the "measure" of all the things in a controversial period when that body was continuously questioned and dissected by the emerging science of medicine in particular. The trope of the human body has a pivotal importance in Shakespeare's Rome, a city which is:

sometimes metaphor, sometimes myth, sometimes both, sometimes neither. Despite its metamorphoses, Rome maintains a distinct identity. Constructed of forums, walls, and Capital, opposed to outlying battlefields, wild, primitive landscapes, and enemy cities, Rome is a palpable though ever-changing presence. The city serves not only as a settling for action, but also as central protagonist⁴.

Shakespeare's Rome is an earthly and heavenly setting at the same time where the body can be problematized with respect to both its humanistic vision and its rationalist "anatomy". Hence in the second part of the volume the essayists widen the perspective onto the relation between the human body and earthly and heavenly spheres. In this perspective, Rome is symbolically and ideologically significant because it provides «a condensation of *urbs* and *orbs*, city and world, [...]»⁵ within which to reconsider the human body.

All the essays of the first part interestingly highlight the early modern attraction towards new scientific discoveries and the display of this curiosity on Shakespeare's stage, keeping their focus on the human body, of course. Anatomy proves to be a shared area between science and humanities, as Maria Del Sapio Garbero points out in the essay which opens the first section of the collection, *Anatomy, Knowledge, and Conspiracy: in Shakespeare's Arena with the Words of Cassio*.

It is worth mentioning some of the essays which deal with *Coriolanus* and the different kinds of corporeality their authors have highlighted. In Claudia Corti's *The Iconic Body: "Coriolanus" and Renaissance Corporeality*, she focuses on the new role of corporeality and the way it seemed to

affect all the XVI century cultural world. In the theatrical dimension the “obsession over corporeality” led also to a revaluation of the iconic aspect of bodies on stage, and influenced, as Corti claims, the writing of such plays as *Coriolanus* where the hero’s «materially, carnally overpowering form» (p. 66) has a meaningful dramatic role.

In Maurizio Calbi’s *States of Exception: Auto-Immunity and The Body-Politic in Shakespeare’s Coriolanus*, the author pays particular attention to the question of boundaries in *Coriolanus* and its intimate connection with the uncanny logic of Derrida’s “auto-immunity”, a metaphor that is both physiological and political. Referring also to Agamben’s philosophical concepts of “state of exception” and “*homo sacer*”, Calbi offers a very interesting analysis of the reason why the protagonist is “ejected” or banished (or self-banished) from Rome’s “body politic”. Taking its cue from the central moment of the play when the Roman hero reacts to the banishment by banishing, Calbi’s essay comes to the conclusion that «[...] the bounded body of the citizen infects itself (i. e., auto-immunises itself) with the violence it supposedly protects itself against». Within Rome’s (auto-) «immunity system», Coriolanus is a «war machine» being also, «in Volumnia’s too censoring words, ‘too absolute’» (3.2.49), in the sense of “*ab-solutus*”, “un-bound”, that is not bound to «any specific community and outside the circle of exchanges which is called Rome» (pp. 80-1).

Volumnia’s body and words are given a particular attention in Antonella Piazza’s *Volumnia, the Roman Patroness*, where the author adopts a privileged gender perspective on the Volumnia’s “human” body. Piazza underlines that though the play has been an animated arena either of sociological or psychoanalytical debates since the eighteenth century, Volumnia has always been demonized or left out. In Piazza’s opinion, she is a fundamental character of the play because she is able to «keep things together and in the end to save Rome» (p. 122) – in the drama’s climactic moment, the fate of Rome is secured by a mother’s bodily supplication. The articulation and the meaning of Volumnia’s role have not, «been investigated enough yet». Shakespeare calls Volumnia a “patroness” on whom all the virtues of classical old age are projected. Piazza explains that, according to Galenic medical theories, the body of post-menopausal, old women “with beard”, just like Volumnia’s, became more similar to a man’s body, thus more likely to gain the authority to “replace” male patriarchal rule makers. This makes her the only «Roman statesman, a Jacobean Machiavellian governor» (p. 122). Volumnia, the “Roman Patroness”, has, in the end, the patriarchal power of a mother as well as of a father, so she can rule both the private and public realms.

Both the public and private perspectives are considered to analyse “corpses” in the sixteenth century in Mariangela Tempera’s *Titus Andronicus: Staging the Mutilated Roman Body*. Tempera’s essay brings to the fore the difficulty for contemporary directors to put on stage this play and, in particular, the two bloodiest scenes: scene 3 of Act 2, where we see the tongueless, handless bleeding body of Lavinia, and scene 1 Act 3, when Titus’s hand is cut off on stage. The author offers some examples of the devices Shakespearean directors like Peter Brook, Deborah Warner, Julie Taymor, to quote some, have used to stage these two scenes, which are then related to actual public mutilations and to theories of sixteen-century blood circulation.

Within the frame provided by the focus on “human bodies”, a particular attention is paid to female bodies, as “performing” bodies staged in both real and dream-like perspectives, reality and imagination. Iolanda Plescia’s *“From me was Posthumus ript”: Cymbeline and the Extraordinary Birth*, deals with Posthumus’s dream on his birth, where «the temporary moment of “female empowerment” is brought to an end when a man [doctor] takes it upon himself to rip – to rape, in a sense – the womb open» (p. 143). Posthumus escapes his mother’s womb as the “male doctor” can rip/rape the female womb with a knife, thus de-feminizing the act of birth.

It is a materialization of the fantasy of an all-male family that Janet Adelman defines as a result of a «ruthless exclusion of all female presence»⁶. In the same perspective, Barbara Antonucci’s *Blood in Language: the Galenic Paradigm of Humours in The Rape of Lucrece and Titus Andronicus* highlights, in both works, the way by which, as she claims, «the female body becomes the site of a process of purification that ultimately deletes both the stain and the woman’s body».

Death and female body are then analysed in terms of painting imagery in Paola Faini’s *Cleopatra’s Corporeal Language*, where the contributor compares visual representations of Cleopatra’s death in sixteenth century German and Italian paintings to Shakespeare’s lines on the heroine’s death, focusing on the moment before the asp’s kiss.

Whereas a dreamy perspective is chosen to analyse Calphurnia’s body language in Simona Corso’s essay, *What Calphurnia knew. Julius Caesar and the Language of Dreams*. The liminal space between dream and reality is also investigated by Viola Papetti’s *Under the Sign of Ovid. Motion and Instance in A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with a particular attention to both human and fairy bodies. Dreams and reality, the world of seeming and the world of being, are brought to the fore also in Michele Marrapodi’s *Mens sana in corpore sano: the Rethoric of the Body in Shakespeare’s Roman and late Plays*, where the real and the imaginary worlds compete for the bodies on stage in *Coriolanus* and *Cymbeline*.

Since the very first Shakespearean Roman play, the body is indeed «conspicuously on stage, in the most various and truculent way», as Alessandro Serpieri claims in his *Body and History in the Political Rhetoric of Julius Caesar*, which closes the first section of the volume. It particularly focuses on the two iconically powerful bodies of Lucrece and Caesar. These “earthly” bodies as well as the heavenly bodies seem, in Serpieri’s opinion, to affect «the unfolding of great epoch-making events» (p. 219).

Ute Berns also underlines that *Julius Caesar* provides evidence of a crude staging of the human (dead) body in her essay, *Performing Anatomy in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar*, presenting Brutus’s and Antony’s speeches over Caesar’s dead body as «exercises in anatomy» (p. 98).

Earthly and heavenly bodies, in the second section of the volume, have a fundamental role in the context of changing geographies and cosmographies. In the Renaissance both the “old” natural bodies, that is the ones studied by classical texts and the “old” science, and the “new” natural bodies, that is an infinite variety of new plants and animals discovered in the New World and all over the world, needed to be analysed through a new lens, provided by a combination of the direct observation of the new sciences and classical knowledge.

This second section opens with Manfred Pfister’s “*Rome and her rats*”: *Coriolanus and the Early Modern Crisis of Distinction between Man, Beast and Monster*, that analyses «the crucial issue of differences and distinctions between man and beast» explored by «both the travellers to new world beyond seas, [...] and early comparative students of human and animal anatomy and ethology». From Pfister’s point of view, *Coriolanus* is «[...] anxiously obsessed with exploring the special status and the limits of man and his relationship with his bestial order, [...]» (pp. 240, 247).

John Gillies’s essay, “*Mighty Space*”: *the Ordinate and Exorbitant in two Shakespeare Plays*, focuses on the limits of the ordered world as it was seen through the lens of the Roman figure of “exorbitance”, according to which the discoveries or conquest beyond a traditional idea of the bounded world are «at once glorious and morally (or even ontologically) transgressive» (p. 259). The subversive aspect of going beyond the geographic, ethnographic and moral/ontological limits/norms is also investigated in Gilberta Golinelli’s ‘*Floating Borders*’: *(Dis)-locating Otherness in the Female Body and the Question of Miscegenation in Titus Andronicus*, where the focus shifts on the transgressive power of exotic female “warriors” as described in the Sixteenth century travelogues and, more in particular, on «the savage female body of Tamora as a complex site of debatable questions» (p. 275).

Ancestral anxieties about the miscenegenation and subversion of the ordered world are also the topic, although from a different perspective,

of Andrea Bellelli's *Where do diseases come from? Reflections on Shakespeare's "contagion of the south"*. The author focuses on Coriolanus's curse on his coward compatriots when he invokes the «contagion of the south» on them, hence he provides a very detailed survey of medical knowledge about epidemic diseases in Shakespeare's time. He points out that at least one of the diseases of the South in Shakespeare's mind is syphilis, and his hints at this epidemic disease «[...] demand quite a remarkable medical competence on the part of his audience» (p. 294) and on his part.

The relationship between science and humanities with respect to both earthly and heavenly bodies is then investigated on a lower level along the chain of being in Giovanni Antonini and Gloria Grazia Rosa's essay, *Shakespeare and Mandragora*. Among natural sciences botany was one of the most important because of its association with medicine and pharmacopoeias, and the focus here is on mandragora, a psychoactive plant which, thanks to the Sixteenth century scientific development and publication of herbals, was finally recognized for its anaesthetic and sleep-inducing pharmacological properties. The authors trace the cultural passage from a magical to a scientific perception of mandragora in Shakespeare's way of referring to the plant's characteristics, in *Othello* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, which, as they point out, is in line with the new scientific discoveries about the plant and its functions at the beginning of the Sixteenth century. From the world of plants, proceeding further down in the *scala naturae*, Maddalena Pennacchia, who is also the author of a very appreciable map of the essays of the volume, investigates the inanimate world of stones and minerals in her essay, *The Stones of Rome: Early Earth Sciences in Julius Caesar and Coriolanus*. The author provides a minute survey of the "scientific" knowledge about earthquakes and the "geological cycle" in Shakespeare's time, and analyses how these earth phenomena seem to surface in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* since «The succession of movement and stasis, concretion and dissolution, in these two plays», claims Pennacchia, «affects earthly and heavenly bodies alike» (p. 312).

Though the lowest level of the *scala naturae* was thought to be inanimate, in Shakespeare's time Giordano Bruno embraced the theory of "abiogenesis" according to which «living matter can be produced from matter without life» (p. 327), as it is well analysed in Gilberto Sacerdoti's *Spontaneous Generation and New Astronomy in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra*. The essay points out how Cleopatra's Egypt and its mud seem to have something wondrous as all the matter there was born by "abiogenesis", or "spontaneous generation". «In this 'Egyptian' and animistic context, then», as Sacerdoti highlights, «the movement of the earth and its capacity to give birth to all things (crocodiles and strange serpents included) are two aspects of the same thing» (p. 332).

Under the influence of Sacerdoti's contribution to the volume, and taking the Egyptian Bacchanal scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* as its starting point, Nancy Isenberg's *Dancing with the Stars in Antony and Cleopatra* leads the readers' attention from the lowest to the highest level of the *scala naturae*, – «[the] metaphorically vehicular body in a particular state of action – dance – that held a position of enormous importance in Renaissance culture and politics» (p. 341). The author discusses the Bacchanal dance and, following Sacerdoti's interpretation, analyses it in relation to Renaissance views on the Cosmic Dance. She concludes that the Egyptian bacchanal scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* «brings together questions of bodies, cosmographies and geographies. This scene tugs away from the old cosmology, subverts the trope of heavenly derived sovereignty, and in its own parodic way signals not only an expanding universe, but also an expanding political geography [...]» (p. 353).

European Renaissance culture and episteme were characterized by an organic model of knowledge, and hence, by a cooperative and interdisciplinary approach. By drawing on human, social and political “bodies”, on the earthly and heavenly bodies offered by the rich scenario of Shakespeare's Roman play, this volume aims to reassess the ways in which the rise of the new science both fostered and fractured an integrated understanding of human beings and their place in the world. It addresses matters of concern for scholars, not necessarily Shakespearean scholars, who are interested in how the humanities and science interfaced in the early modern period and how bodies were questioned and re-conceptualized in Shakespeare's works. This collection brings to the fore a wide range of issues connected to the Renaissance re-mapping of the world and the human body, the macro and the microcosm. Generally speaking, it is worth reading for all those working on the interaction between sciences and humanities.

MARIA IZZO

Notes

1. J. Dee, *Mathematicall Praeface to Elements of Geometrie of Euclid of Megara*, 1570, The Project Gutenberg Ebooks, Etext-No.: 22062. Release date: April 28 2011.
2. On “Roman” Shakespeare, see also M. Del Sapio Garbero (ed.), *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome*, Ashgate, Farnham-Burlington 2009.
3. M. Del Sapio Garbero, *Introduction: Shakespeare's Rome and Renaissance “Anthropographie”*, in Del Sapio Garbero, Isenberg, Pennacchia (eds.), *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome*, cit., p. 17.
4. R. S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, p. 17.
5. See M. Del Sapio Garbero, *Introduction: Performing “Rome” from the Periphery*, in Ead. (ed.), *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome*, cit., pp. 7-8.
6. J. Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers. Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*, Routledge, London-New York 1992, p. 131.