

TO THE BARE BONE: ANATOMIES OF (DIS)EMBODIMENT IN SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: *This article studies references to bones in a small Shakespearean corpus so as to identify their role in shaping an anatomical imaginary with symbolic valences. As part of a larger project meant to study whether or not Shakespeare's anatomical imaginary is peculiar to the Bard, the article closely reads such occurrences, in tandem with the head terms' lexico-symbolic legacy. Furthermore, I compare some anatomical images in Shakespeare with those peppering Middle English biblical drama, to trace a likely continuum, if any, between the late medieval collective imagination of the body and violence and that permeating the Elizabethan age.*

Keywords: *anatomy, bone, memento mori, Middle English theatre, Shakespeare*

1. Introduction

When, in *Richard II*, Northumberland kneels before the king with an embassy from Bolingbroke requesting to see him, allegedly in order to surrender arms, Northumberland's speech (III.3.102-117) abounds in references to body parts. Kneeling (III.3.112) and hand kissing (III.3.103) are instantly recognisable gestures of submission, in this case compounded by (feigned) fealty pledging. Bolingbroke (through Northumberland) takes an oath on the bodily parts of Richard – and, through kinship, of his ancestors, identified synecdochically as bones (III.3.105, III.3.108). Bolingbroke also swears his allegiance “by the royalties of both your bloods,/ Currents that spring from one most gracious head” (III.3.106-107). *Blood* is a traditional shorthand metaphor for descent or ancestry (*Middle English Dictionary* [MED] 2001, s.v. “blōd”) and *head* for “kingship, authority” (Vries 1976, s.v. “head”) or importance (MED 2001, s.v. “hēd”). To bolster his claims of post-surrender fealty, Bolingbroke pledges his *heart*, metaphorically “the true self as opposed to the outward persona” (MED 2001, s.v. “herte”), and likewise the *spiritual* centre (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1982, s.v. “cœur”; Vries 1976, s.v. “heart”) qua *soul* (Vries 1976), hence also the seat of *emotion* (MED 2001; Vries 1976).

This study is part of a larger ongoing project which examines references to body parts in Shakespeare's plays. My overall project aims to go beyond identifying Shakespeare's medieval legacy (Cooper 2010; Schreyer 2014; Perry, Watkins (eds.) 2009; Morse, Cooper, Holland (eds.) 2013). It probes whether or not there is a mentality continuum between the anatomical imagination of medieval western (Catholic) Europe and that of Elizabethan (Protestant) England. For convenience,

here I closely read a small Shakespearean dramatic corpus of references to bones (and only passingly to other body parts), which I organise in accordance with functional/discursive contexts.

2. Elizabethan medievalism

As mentalities and religious sensibilities cannot change overnight, Elizabethan culture and religion were pervaded by the “deep structures of medieval culture” (Cooper 2010: 1), which also “affected [...] the way [Shakespeare] conceived his plays” (idem: 2). The biblical plays, in particular, although forbidden through the Act of 16 May 1559 and also suppressed by ecclesiastical authorities in the 1560s and 1570s, “remained vitally present to the next generation of theatergoers, even those who could not have experienced them directly” (O’Connell 2009: 201). Overall, the Reformation afforded “a cultural re-formation and re-membling of bonds between early modern subjects and medieval artifacts” (Schreyer 2014: 2).

Stratford’s location permitted young Shakespeare to watch performances at Coventry in the 1570s, as suggested by “scattered references in his plays” to biblical drama (O’Connell 2009: 200). (Unfortunately, too little of the Coventry corpus – the Shearmen and Taylors’ and the Weavers’ pageants – is extant, for us to gauge what Shakespeare could watch.) Fascinated by biblical drama and “the ways in which he [could] transmute it in his own theatre” (idem: 199), Shakespeare created plays which “paradoxically distinguish [themselves] from the mysteries precisely through transformative incorporation of elements of that dramatic tradition” (Schreyer 2014: 2).

How medieval is Shakespeare’s body imagery and what body is that, especially considering the “incarnational aesthetic” of medieval and Elizabethan drama? (Gail McMurray Gibson 1989, qtd. in Cooper 2010: 240, note 21, uses “incarnational aesthetic” to describe medieval drama). *Staging* – not simply reporting rhetorically – *the action* (Cooper 2010: 48) focuses on the body and, I contend, reveals its cognitive-epistemological potential. The latter aspect thus tallies with the fundamental ambiguity – and comprehensiveness – of the Elizabethan name for the playhouse: *theatrum mundi*, “encyclopaedia of the world” (idem: 52). The aptly named Globe became “a new kind of social and cognitive space – a material realization of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor” (Montrose 1996: 210).

3. The rheumatic body in pain

Many of Shakespeare’s characters demonstrate a lot of common sense – often of the earthy type – regarding body/health. Indeed, some of their remarks sound like clinical studies of sorts.

Having been in the sea during the tempest will affect/afflict his bones forever, Trinculo fears: “I have been in such a pickle since I saw you/ last that, I fear me, will never out of my bones” (*The Tempest*, V.1.285-286). Trinculo’s ‘pickled’ bones – unlike Falstaff’s in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* – risk developing a rheumatic condition.

The Elizabethans used *rheum*-related terms loosely and could ‘diagnose’, if not yet name, rheumatism (Chung 2016: 708) in their ailing bodies. In Shakespeare, “rheum”-derived words appear in diverse contexts: for a “raw, rheumatic day” (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, III.1.44), possibly *humid*; or for Falstaff as “rheumatic” (*Henry V*, II.3.35), likely choleric, in “handl[ing] women” (II.3.34) (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. “rheumatic”).

Andrew Boorde’s *The Breuiarie of Health* (1547) (qtd. in Norri 2016, s.v. “rheum”), ascribed rheum to either a condition in the head or exposure to cold: “Reume is ingendred in the heed, which is a viscus humour, and it is ingendred of takynge colde in the fete and in the heed & necke” Indeed, the Middle English noun *reume* (first recorded c. 1398) named any “[w]atery bodily humour thought to drain from brain and cause sickness in lower parts” (Norri 2016, s.v. “rheum”; see also MED 2001, s.v. “reume” n.).

Rheumatism names nowadays “a group of conditions often with vague or non-existent physical signs”: aches and pains, polymyalgia rheumatica, myopathy and “soft tissue (nonarticular) rheumatism” (Golding 1981: 17). However, “the commonest type of rheumatism” is actually *referred pain*, i.e., pain which does not originate in the aching area (ibid.).

In Shakespeare, not ‘pickling’, but age causes bone-aches. Gonzalo (*The Tempest*, III.3.2) and the Nurse (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.4.26) seem to be afflicted by rheumatic pain. Notwithstanding, the condition begs for remedy: “Is this the poultice for my aching bones?” (II.4.63), the Nurse enquires.

Old Pandarus complains about bone-aches (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.3.108) alongside “phthisic” (V.3.104-105), a condition related to pulmonary tuberculosis, and “rheum in mine eyes” (V.3.107-108), humid matter in or discharge from his eyes (cf. *Hamlet*, II.2.201; *Henry IV, Part 2*, I.2.181). In the alternative Quarto ending (Shakespeare 2005: 776, Additional passage B), Pandarus complains, in his soliloquy, about the “goodly medicine” ([V.11.4]) – Troilus’s blow – for his “aching bones” (ibid.), before vowing to retaliate so that Troilus’s bones will ache worse ([V.11.18]). Pandarus’s latest bone-ache is social in origin: it owes to his disreputable business to procure his niece, Cressida, for Troilus. How could the kind-hearted Gonzalo or Nurse have been made to complain about “phthisic” and “rheum in [their] eyes”, alongside the virtue-neutral bone-ache which plagues the elderly?

4. What’s in a bone?

Unlike his predecessors, yet like Galen in the second century CE, Andreas Vesalius did not organise his anatomical treatise *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) by replicating the order of dissection (which started with the fleshy parts most easily yielding to decay). Rather, he preferred to ‘build’ his treatise on the solid ‘foundations’ of bones (Book 1) and their ‘springs’, the muscles (Book 2), as if it were an edifice. Another novelty was Vesalius’s presentation of whole-body images from the front, side and rear, shown in exemplary actions: the full skeleton plates on three consecutive pages (Vesalius 1543: 163-165) depict animated bones in a

Christian-melancholy posture (idem: 163) – including the proto-Hamletian *memento mori* (idem: 164) – or praying (idem: 165).

Mutatis mutandis, Shakespeare uses references to the bones hardly differently. (This is not meant to suggest Shakespeare's familiarity with Vesalius's tract.) Shakespeare's bone references recur as the paradigmatic synecdoche for the living (cf. MED 2001, s.v. "bōn"), often corresponding to our modern "flesh and blood". The latter is itself a phrase of medieval origin, e.g. *flesh and blod* (c. 1275), for the human body as a whole, or *blod and bon* (c. 1300), for "the body, physical nature" and "the bodily appetites" (MED, s.v. "blōd" n. 1).

In the simplest – quasi-Vesalian – terms, human beings can be identified synecdochically as bones. On being deposed, Richard II invokes his divine right to the throne (*Richard II*, III.3.76-77) by reference to God's hand (III.3.76) that has granted it. He avers that no *human* hand – couched metonymically as "blood and bone" (III.3.78) – could depose him without thereby committing a criminal offence (III.3.80).

Bassanio encourages Antonio not to despair regarding the latter's contract with Shylock. He does so by using a fairly comprehensive anatomical conceit: "The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all,/ Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood" (*Merchant of Venice*, IV.1.110-112). Bassanio sounds intent on laying down his life – "my flesh, blood, bones, and all" (IV.1.111) – rather than let the Jewish usurer exact his payment: a pound of Antonio's flesh. Precisely Bassanio's "one drop of blood" (IV.1.112) phrase – of racial ill repute in the post-Civil War US – will be used by Portia/Balthasar to revoke the infamous contract (IV.1.302-309).

When Achilles orders Hector killed, he uses the bone-for-person synecdoche compounded by the Hector-as-Troy metonymy: "Now, Troy, sink down./ Here lies thy heart, thy sinews and thy bone" (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.9.11-12). Achilles's discursive anatomisation of his enemy functions as a *blazon* of sorts. (The very verb "anatomize" appears in *King Lear*, III.6.34-36 and *Henry IV*, Part 2, Introduction, 21.) Achilles sees Hector as Troy's heart, i.e., the "centre of life, vitality, or energy" and "the seat of courage or determination" (MED 2001, s.v. "herte"), and a valiant warrior, the sinew-and-bone 'mechanism' of Troy's defensive warfare. (Besides denoting tendons, muscles or even nerves (MED 2001, s.vv. "sineu", "nerve"; Norri 2016, s.v. "sinew"), "sinew" also connoted the "source of power or strength" (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. "sinew")). Ulysses used a similarly complex conceit earlier in his address to his commander-in-chief, Agamemnon. Like "thy sinews and thy bone", mentioned of Hector in relation to Troy (V.9.12), "nerve and bone of Greece" (I.3.54), of Agamemnon, connotes Agamemnon's military, not just political, stewardship of his country and his spiritual containment of his warrior countrymen.

Besides synecdochically naming the human being, bones reflect one's condition. Being work-exhausted can be felt in the bones, Claudio states (*Measure for Measure*, IV.2.64-66). His simile demonstrates the (Vesalian) obvious: that bones bear the literal and figurative burden of life.

Destitution, psychological turmoil and impiety alike can result in emaciation. Romeo purchases the lethal potion from an apothecary with "[m]eagre [...] looks" (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.1.40), whom "[s]harp misery had worn [...] to the bones"

(V.1.41). Timon conjures the flesh-less bones image in his misanthropic advice to his compassionate servant Flavius: “let the famished flesh slide from the bone” (*Timon of Athens*, IV.3.529). Alcibiades curses the uncompassionate senators: “Now the gods keep you old enough that you may live/ Only in bone, that none may look on you!” (*Timon of Athens*, III.6.102-103). Lucio slights the First Gentleman: “thy bones are hollow, impiety has made a feast of thee” (*Measure for Measure*, I.2.54-55). The interlocutor can escape criticism about his impiety-induced bone erosion only by feigning an interest in Mistress Overdone’s ill health: “How now, which of your hips has the most profound sciatica?” (I.2.56-57). Ironically, her condition also alludes to lack of ‘virtue’: the Elizabethans regarded sciatica as “a symptom of venereal disease and an affliction among bawds” (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. “sciatica”). If to be but skin and bone is to be reduced to bare essentials for survival, bone and ache often appear to be unwholesome, yet virtually – if not always virtuously too – inseparable bedfellows, as much in life as argumentatively.

When Macbeth swears: “I’ll fight, till from my bones my flesh be hack’d” (*Macbeth*, V.3.33), he envisages his death as disincarnation – albeit not emaciation – through the un-fleshing of the bones in battle. The image recalls King Herod the Great’s massacre of the Innocents in Middle English plays, such as the so-called N-Town collection (henceforth NT). In *The Slaughter of the Innocents and the Death of Herod* (NT20), Herod orders: “Hewe the flesch with (*through*) the bon” (NT20, l. 26, qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 48-49). Likewise, evoking the dragons (NT29/35) that feed on the flesh of the Christians (NT29) driven, upon his order, into dungeons (NT35), King Herod Antipas exclaims, in *Herod; Trial before Annas and Cayphas*: “To me is very plesauns/ [...] To rend flesche and bonys” (NT29, ll. 34, 36, qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 89). However different superficially, revengeful punishment of the undesirable in the two Herods’ case, and valiant death in combat, in Macbeth’s, point in the same direction: that of a collective imagination permeated by violent corporeal disintegration.

Bone references work even more appositely as the paradigmatic synecdoche for the dead (MED 2001, s.v. “bōn”), in a traditional empirically-based conceit. The medieval practice of bone relocation from the grave into the charnel house could only boost the synecdoche.

The ossuary features prominently in Juliet’s retort to Friar Laurence. Determined to commit suicide rather than marry Paris, Juliet learns about a “remedy” (*Romeo and Juliet*, IV.1.76) to feign death and embraces the possibility:

Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house
O’ercovered quite with dead men’s rattling bones,
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
Or bid me go into a new-made grave
And hide me with a dead man in his tomb
(IV.1.81-85)

Being with the dead – covered by bones and putrefying body parts – is preferable for Juliet, to betraying her beloved husband. However, on preparing to drink the potion, Juliet fears that, should it fail her, she will either die or experience

The horrible conceit of death and night,
 Together with the terror of the place –
 As in a vault, an ancient receptacle
 Where for this many hundred years the bones
 Of all my buried ancestors are packed; [...]
 O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
 Environèd with all these hideous fears,
 And madly play with my forefathers' joints [?]
 (IV.3.36-40, 48-50)

Juliet evokes, in late medieval *danse macabre* fashion, the grisly ludic opportunities an early awakening presents. Mad with terror, she can “madly play with [her] forefathers' joints” (IV.3.50) in the crypt so as to tame her “hideous fears” (IV.3.49). A handful of ancestors' bones can furnish Juliet a sui generis toy for alleviating her dread of death and the dead – not unlike in artist Michael Wolgemut's prancing-skeletons dance of death (*The Nuremberg Chronicle* 1493: 261). (Shakespeare was familiar, albeit not necessarily first-hand, with *danse macabre* and *transi* tombs representations (Cooper 2010: 28-30).) Yet, Juliet also wonders rhetorically if she wouldn't “dash out [her] desp'rate brains” (IV.3.53) “with some great kinsman's bone/ As with a club” (IV.3.52-53).

A comparable conceit is used by Portia, in a similar context to Juliet's: “I had rather be/ married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth/ than to either of these” (*Merchant of Venice*, I.2.49-50). In Portia's death emblem (I.2.50), the skull virtually cannibalises its own body or perhaps another's.

Ancestors are typically referred to as “bones”. Macduff answers Rosse's question about the whereabouts of Duncan's body in terms of the late king's guardianship of his predecessors' “bones” (*Macbeth*, II.4.36) in the “sacred storehouse” (II.4.35) at Colme-kill. As we have seen, Bolingbroke, through his envoy, Northumberland, refers to the ancestor of Richard II as “your royal grandsire's bones” (*Richard II*, III.3.105). Invoking the ancestors' tomb, in his oath, gives further legitimacy to Bolingbroke's claims (III.3.104-105).

Bone references can evoke death and the dead in relatively restrained terms. So do Mutius's brothers (*Titus Andronicus*, I.1.366, I.1.384-385) or Leonato (and later the bereaved Claudio) vis-à-vis Hero's alleged burial: “Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb,/ And sing it to her bones, sing it tonight” (*Much Ado about Nothing*, V.1.276-277). Annoyed that his speech as Hector is being interrupted, during the performance of the Nine Worthies, Armado demands: “The sweet war-man [Hector] is dead and rotten. Sweet/ chucks, beat not the bones of the buried” (*Love's Labour's Lost*, V.2.653-654). Referring to Chaucer, whose “The Knight's Tale” (in *The Canterbury Tales*) inspired *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the speaker of the Prologue commends Chaucer's bones (Prologue 17) to “sweet sleep” (idem 29). In the play proper, the First Queen, alongside the other two, complains to Theseus about Creon's uncharitable decision to forbid the burial of their vanquished husbands (I.1.43-44, I.1.49-50). Even if, pragmatically, it would be too early to refer to the dead as “bones”, nonetheless the force of the traditional image sanctions the Queen's (I.1.43, I.1.49) and Theseus's (I.4.7) imagery.

Under the force of the-dead-as-bones trope, sometimes the living too imagine their (or others') time of death or burial by evoking bones. King and clown alike do so. Such is the case of Richard II (*Richard II*, III.2.149-150; cf. Griffiths 2022: 45) or Henry V (*Henry V*, I.2.228-229) and of Feste (*Twelfth Night*, II.4.61). When the Duchess of York invites Queen Elizabeth to sit down, the latter contemplates the prospect of rather hiding her own bones – being dead – in a grave (*Richard III*, IV.4.31-34). Enraged that Othello has slandered Desdemona, Emilia curses him: “A halter pardon him, and hell gnaw his bones!” (*Othello*, IV.2.140). For Emilia, Othello deserves an eternity in hell.

From the synecdochic bones-qua-body it is only a short step to contemplating “the way of all flesh” (Samuel Butler’s phrase) and/or appraising life in the medieval religious terms of *memento mori* and *vanitas*. At the ironic end, Falstaff chides the prostitute Doll Tearsheet for acting like a *memento mori* incarnate: “do not speak like a death’s-head,/ do not bid me remember mine end” (*Henry IV, Part 2*, II.4.236-237). In her turn, Doll excoriates the emaciated First Beadle as a merciless Death figure: “Goodman death, goodman bones!” (V.4.28). At the commonsensical end, Ulysses notes the decay of persons, relationships and feelings alike over time (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.3.165-168), in an adroit summary of *Everyman*. In doing so, he also reframes Hamlet’s “yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?” (*Hamlet*, II.2.309-310), the anti-climax of his “What a piece of work is a man!” monologue (II.2.305-312).

Confronted with the burial at sea of his wife, Thaisa, Pericles mourns being unable to erect “a monument upon thy bones” (*Pericles*, Scene 11.60). Rather, “the belching whale/ And humming water must o’erwhelm thy corpse,/ Lying with simple shells” (Scene 11.61-63). Pericles’s imagery shares little of the (post-)medieval depictions of rottenness, preferring instead the poise of the (absent) mausoleum. Its benignness foreshadows Ariel’s song, in *The Tempest*, which describes King Alonso’s alleged death by drowning:

Full fathom five thy father lies.
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.
(I.2.399-405)

In Ariel’s song, the image of classic rottenness is transmuted, indeed, sea-changed, into one of beautification-qua-mineralisation – a reverse *vanitas* (or quasi-sanctification). Shakespeare’s “benthic imagination” (Brayton 2012: 53), i.e., imagination of the depths (Greek *benthos*, “bottom of the sea”), typically “bring[s] the reader into their murky otherworldliness” (idem: 68). However, in this imaginary “benthic metamorphosis” decay becomes *poesis* (ibid.).

By contrast, in *Richard III*, Clarence’s account of his nightmare about his death by drowning bears all the trappings of medieval horror:

Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wrecks,
 Ten thousand men that fishes gnawed upon;
 Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
 Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
 All scattered in the bottom of the sea.
 Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes
 Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept –
 As 'twere in scorn of eyes – reflecting gems,
 That wooed the slimy bottom of the deep
 And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by.
 (I.4.24-33)

Clarence's is a *memento mori* which depicts the aquatic decay of shipwreck victims in nightmarishly graphic terms compounded by apparent mockery (I.4.31, I.4.33). His "sights of ugly death" (I.4.23) are cast in the medieval dream-vision tradition, which often shows the fate of the sinful dead in hell (cf. Brayton 2012: 41, 71-73).

Indeed, in Shakespeare, many references to the dead are either soberly admonitory or downright macabre, in true medieval vein. Occasionally, though, they may partake of the spirit of both. Such is the case of Richard II's answer to Aumerle, when his cousin enquires about the whereabouts of his father's body:

Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs [...]
 [...] For within the hollow crown
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king
 Keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits,
 Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
 Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
 To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
 Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
 As if this flesh which walls about our life
 Were brass impregnable; and humoured thus,
 Comes at the last, and with a little pin
 Bores through his castle wall; and farewell, king.
 Cover your heads, and mock not with flesh and blood
 With solemn reverence. [...]
 (Richard II, III.2.141, 156-168)

Vanitas and *memento mori* underpin Richard II's recognition of royal vulnerability, indebted to the iconography of Death depicted as a crowned skeleton (Cooper 2010: 30). His sarcasm is matched, even outclassed, by Hamlet's, when the Danish prince reveals the fate of dead Polonius (*Hamlet*, IV.3.17-36) as the would-be feast of "politic worms" (IV.3.21).

Unlike Hamlet (*Hamlet* III.1.70-90), Timon ascribes impediment to progress in life to disease, which consumes body and determination alike. For the Athenian misanthrope, the human body is but a receptacle and display case of wasting diseases qua moral rotteness, "[c]onsumptions" (*Timon of Athens*, IV.3.151), i.e., often "venereal disease" (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. "consumption"). He envisages syphilis planted into men's "hollow bones" (IV.3.153) and the crippling resulted from kicking

their shins (IV.3.151-153). In Timon's quasi-apocalyptic speech, the punishment of the priest who publicly vituperates about carnal pleasures, yet privately pursues them himself (IV.3.155-157), is to be struck by leprosy, so that his nose rots off (IV.3.157-159). Sin will have eroded his living body just as decay does the corpse – as the medieval *transi* tombs showed (Hallam et al. 1999: 25).

Unsurprisingly, the anatomy of dreaded ghosts takes after that of the dead (or of Timon's picture of the dead in life). When Macbeth endeavours to drive away Banquo's Ghost, his description of the immaterial body – "Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold./ Thou hast no speculation in those eyes" (III.4.93-94) – recalls emaciated or dead bodies.

5. The body in pieces in threats, curses and oaths

Shakespeare's characters do not shun either physical or verbal abuse, and the latter – framed as threats or curses – often invokes the former. Deliberately aggressive actions – punishment or revenge, and, less typically, trials – demonstrate the vulnerability of the body frame.

An interesting case occurs in *The Tempest*. Whilst Caliban himself curses Prospero (I.2.323-326, I.2.366-367, II.2.1-3), Prospero's threats (I.2.327-332, I.2.370-373), followed by action, command Caliban's grudging obedience. Furious that Caliban is plotting with Stephano and Trinculo against his life, Prospero orders Ariel:

[...] charge my goblins that they grind (*torment*) their joints
With dry convulsions (*stiff spasms*), shorten (*tighten*) up their sinews
With agèd cramps, and more pinch-spotted make them
Than pard or cat o'mountain.

(IV.1.256-259)

Caliban and his Neapolitan accomplices are thus doomed to the painful existence of the elderly, afflicted by rheumatism (IV.1.256-257; cf. I.2.372), cramps (IV.1.258; cf. I.2.327-328, I.2.370), unsightly spots caused by torturous pinching (IV.1.258; cf. I.2.330-332) – and terror. Prospero's recourse to magic converts the body into a weapon that doubly punishes the victim: both through pain-inflicting torture (Scarry 1985: 47) and through his virtual transformation into an old, decrepit person.

Torn between the demands of his elder daughters to downsize his retinue and his urgent need to be housed by either one, a rejected Lear curses Goneril: "Strike her young bones,/ You taking airs, with lameness!" (*King Lear*, II.2.336-337). Lear's tongue-inflicted suffering, for her demand "struck me with her tongue" (II.2.333), 'calls' for the presumptuous daughter's bone affliction (II.2.336-337).

On seeing Ferdinand's forced labour of piling up logs, Miranda compassionately volunteers to shoulder his task. The prince gallantly refuses her help: "I'd rather crack my sinews, break my back" (*The Tempest*, III.1.24). Ferdinand's oath recalls the imagery of the snapping sinews and broken bones central to the Middle English Crucifixion plays. In the York *Crucifixion* (henceforth, Y35), after driving the peg

through “bones and senous (*sinews*)” (Y35, l. 103; qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 133) to pin Jesus to the cross, the soldiers realise that his left hand, with shrunken sinews (idem: Y35, l. 108), cannot reach the hole. Accordingly, they haul him into position with ropes, “Yf all his synnous go asoundre” (Y35, 132), even if all his sinews were to be torn asunder.

Few Shakespearean characters, irrespective of their social standing, are completely invulnerable to physical violence. Some experience beating due to the ruler’s madness: “I feel’t upon my bones” (*Timon of Athens*, III.7.114). Others brag about inflicting it. Although constantly hit and/or threatened by Ajax, Thersites mentions reciprocal beating: “I have bobbed his/ brain more than he has beat my bones. I will buy nine/ sparrows for a penny, and his *pia mater* is not worth/ the ninth part of a sparrow” (*Troilus and Cressida*, II.1.71-74). The more battery in punishment or revenge Shakespeare’s plays threaten or describe, the more it recalls the spectacle of punishment and scorn of the Middle English Passion plays. In York’s *Christ before Pilate 2: The Judgement* (henceforth Y33), for instance, Jesus’s profuse bleeding at the hands of his tormentors looks as though his brain were pouring out from the armour of his skull: “it helde to his hede þat þe harness (*brains*) out hailes (*pour*)” (Y33, ll. 399, 401, qtd. in Ciobanu 2018:131). The description virtually foreshadows Thersites’s boast (*Troilus and Cressida*, II.1.71-73) that Ajax’s skull cannot protect his brain well, on meeting Thersites’s blows.

For the Romans, outstanding war prisoners are meant for sacrifice before the tomb of the dead – “this earthly prison of their bones” (*Titus Andronicus*, I.1.99) – to appease them (I.1.100). Lucius demands to be given “the proudest prisoner of the Goths,/ That we may hew his limbs and on a pile/ *Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh” (I.1.96-98). His verb “hew” (I.1.97), of Anglo-Saxon origin, meant in Middle English to “chop (sth.), cut, hew” and to “dismember or mutilate (sb., a part of the body)”, hence also to “cut or strike with a weapon in combat” (MED 2001, s.v. “heuen” v.1). The horrifying image conjured by Lucius’s “hew his limbs” echoes the terms in which Deus, in York’s *The Building of the Ark* (henceforth Y8), warns Noah he will destroy humankind in punishment for unmentioned/-able sins: “þai shall be shente (*destroyed, damned*)/ And fordone (*destroyed, damned*) hoyly, hyde (*rejected, forsaken*) and hewe (*stricken*)” (Y8, ll. 21-22; qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 88). As we have seen, N-Town’s Herod the Great orders his soldiers to butcher the infants: “Hewe the flesch with (*through*) the bon” (NT20, l. 26). In both Shakespeare and the Middle English plays, the atrocity of this image of destruction is augmented by the speaker’s association with tyrannical power.

In an age when the revenge tragedy was thriving, Shakespeare could depict the dismemberment of enemies in revenge. Perhaps the best known scene of threatening followed by its enactment is Titus Andronicus’s punishment of the rapists of Lavinia, Chiron and Demetrius:

This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,
Whiles Lavinia ’tween her stumps doth hold
The basin that receives your guilty blood. [...]

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
 And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
 And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
 And make two pasties of your shameful heads,
 And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
 Like to the earth swallow her own increase. [...]

And now, prepare your throats. Lavinia, come,
 Receive the blood, and when that they are dead
 Let me go grind their bones to powder small,
 And with this hateful liquor temper it,
 And in that paste let their vile heads be baked.
 (V.2.180-182, V.2.185-190, V.2.195-199)

This graphic description of the impending execution-revenge has long been noticed for its cruelty not only, physically, towards the two Goth brothers, but also, emotionally (and also physically, through straining), towards Lavinia. (Critics seems to ignore Tamora). Inspired by Seneca's *Thyestes*, the envisaged bloody "banquet" (V.2.192, V.2.201) intended to fool Tamora into feasting cannibalistically, if unknowingly, on her own progeny magnifies – through repetition – the atrocity of the utter destruction of the body, bone grinding and all.

In sickness (or death) as in health, bones appear to be much more crucial than the very flesh they 'bear'. Paradoxically, though, such solid matter can be crushed so easily – to indicate the vulnerability of the body to violent actions, disease and decay at any stage in life (and also after death, the latter).

6. Conclusion

The above inventory of bone references in some of Shakespeare's plays is not meant to be exhaustive. Nor is it sufficiently elaborated on so as to furnish a strong case study of the mentality continuum between the anatomical imagination of medieval Catholic Europe and that of Protestant England, which my overall project investigates. Where possible, I have indicated Shakespeare's medieval legacy either at the lexical level or in *memento mori* imagery or in relation to Middle English biblical drama. Determining to what extent Shakespeare included 'original' anatomical topoi – apart from Ariel's description of Alonso's envisaged "sea-change" bea(u)tification – is tantalising, yet hardly my goal here. I would argue, provisionally, that body references belong to a full-fledged *collective* (rather than idiosyncratic) anatomical imagination.

From a theatrical perspective, what such references accomplish on the stage is the characters' humanisation and experience of embodied cognition. From stock characters and two-dimensional speakers, the characters become relatable three-dimensional 'beings', whose (fear of) ailments, fatigue, extreme passions, old age or death the actors can make visible – embody – all the more convincingly. Vulnerability can conceivably be regarded as the lowest common denominator of being "flesh and bone", and the characters may reach cognitive depths with an undeniable philosophical tinge by merely invoking bones in *danse macabre* fashion to describe the human condition.

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