



King Lear - Disease

In Shakespeare's time, the human body was frequently used as a metaphor for the kingdom. *King Lear* is a good example of this. In his *True Law of Free Monarchies*, King James I of England describes the link thus:

And the proper office of a king towards his subjects agrees very well with the office of the head towards the body and all members thereof, for from the head, being the seat of judgment, proceeds the care and foresight of guiding, and preventing all evil that may come to the body and any part thereof. The head cares for the body: so does the king for his people. [...] in case any of them be affected with infirmity [the head/king] must cut care and provide for their remedy, in case it be curable, and, if otherwise, cut them off for fear of infecting of the rest, even so it is betwixt the prince and his people.

Lear refers to Goneril and Regan as though they are a disease infecting his body. When Regan refuses to offer comfort to Lear and to keep all his knights, he says, she is 'a disease that's in my flesh, / Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil, / A plague-sore an embossed carbuncle, / In my corrupted blood. (Act 2 Scene)

There is an obvious link therefore between Lear's complaints of a diseased body and the state of his kingdom. Since he handed over power to Goneril and Regan, corruption and the threat of war have jeopardised the stability of the land.