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Jane Freeman Performing the Bodies of King Lear

Fictional characters may break the laws of the land with complete abandon. In the first scene of *King Lear*, the title character gives away land and power that are not his to give, and in so doing he separates his body politic from his body natural, thereby indulging in a freedom that was not available to King James I. King James himself had alluded to the theory of the king's two bodies in his first speech to Parliament,^[1] and as he watched *King Lear* at Whitehall in 1606, he did so with the culturally constructed belief that the body politic and the body natural of a king are indivisible.

The theory of the king's two bodies appears often in the jurisprudence, the iconography, and the drama of Tudor and Stuart England. Although the significance of this theory to *King Lear* is evident from Lear's opening lines, the implications of being 'Twin-born with greatness' (*Henry V* 4.1.254) have received less scholarly attention in *King Lear* than in *Henry V* or *Richard II*.^[2] As we consider the history of *King Lear* in performance, however, the theory of the king's two bodies provides a focusing lens through which we can see significant cultural shifts in attitudes toward both kingship and the human body.

The relationship between the body politic and the body natural may seem to be a simple dichotomy equated with dichotomies such as the head and the heart, or the public and private parts of one's life. But, of course, none of these pairings is simple; the head does not exist discrete from the heart, and our public and private selves are interconnected. In a similar way, a monarch's bodies are inseparable and the precise relationship between the two varies, for the body politic and the body natural are not fixed realities but: social constructs that change with time and point of view. Just as 'what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social

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Footnotes

[1] Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession*, (London, 1977), p. 133.

[2] For full-length studies of the theory of the king's two bodies in Tudor and Stuart England, see Kantorowicz, Ernst H., *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton N.J., 1957); Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession*; and, more recently, Albert Rolls, *The Theory of the King's Two Bodies in*

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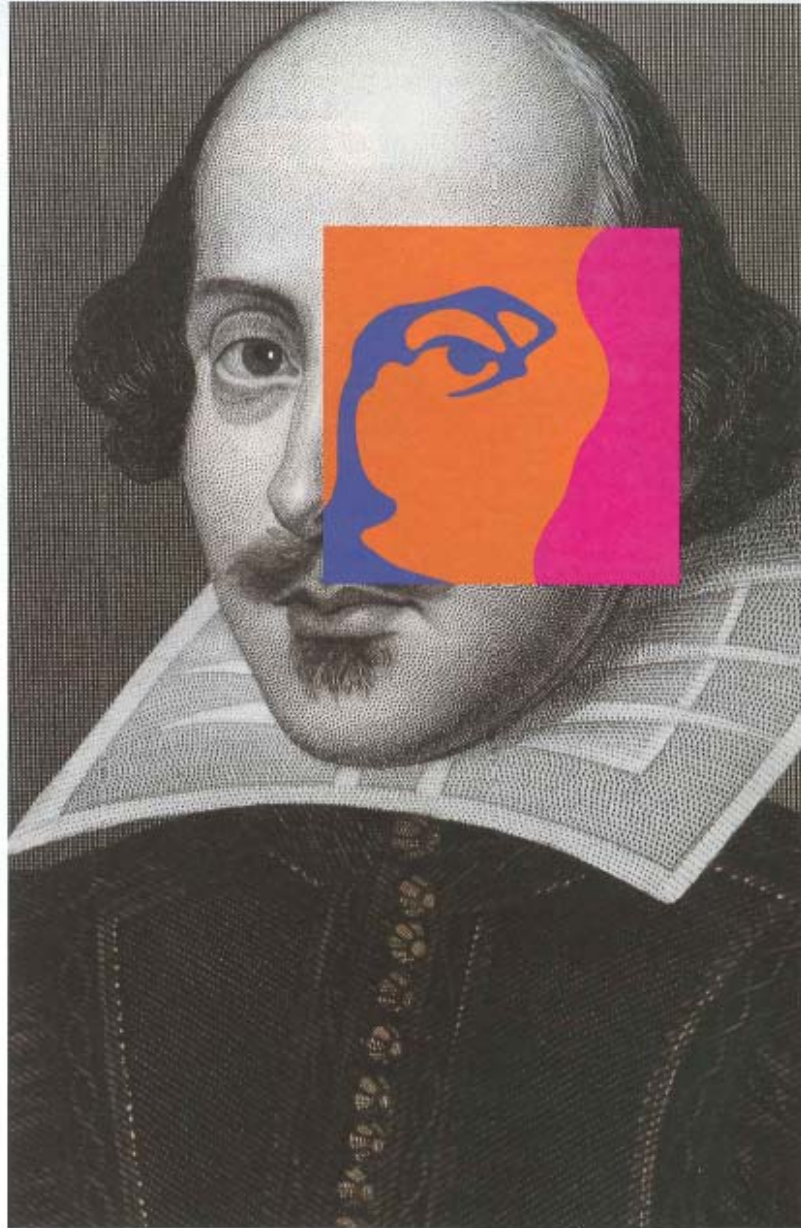
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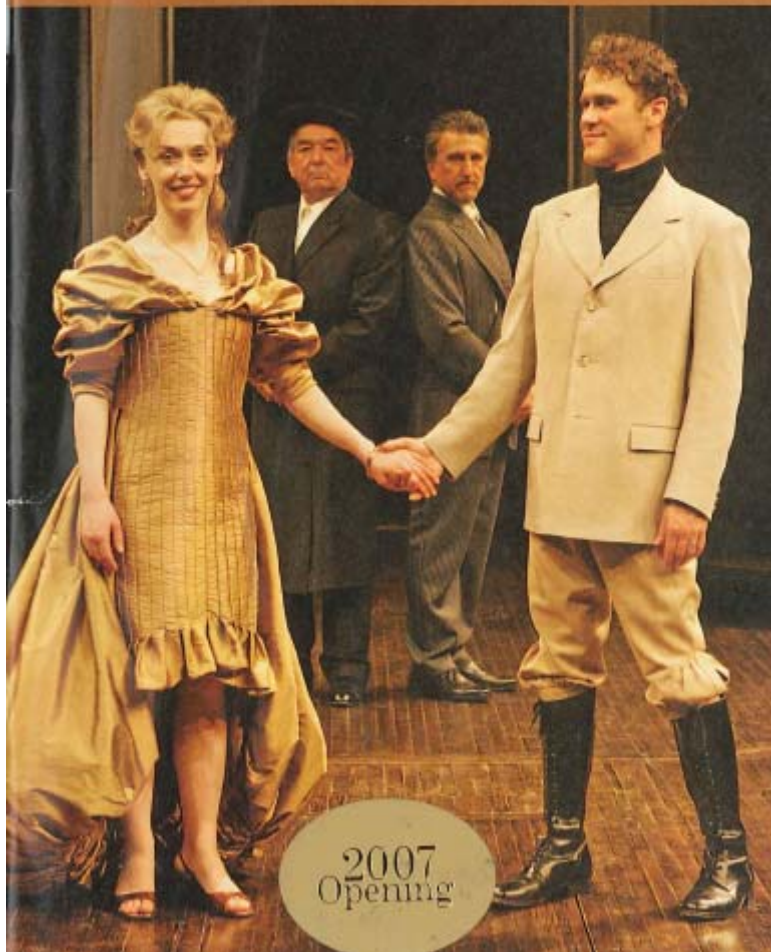
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