

THE HEART AND THE EYE IN *KING LEAR*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse how Shakespeare's *King Lear* revisits the traditional discourse on the heart and the eye as presented in medical and moral treatises of the early modern period. In the play the eye is disallowed as a valid instrument of perception and of cognition. Lear's and Gloucester's initial mistakes, *i.e.* banishing their children from their sight, are emblematic of their physical and intellectual short-sightedness. Under the guidance of the Fool's and Tom's benevolent tuition, Lear is shown the language of the heart made of tenderness, tears and compassion. Recognizing responsibility for the other and seeing beyond ego, Lear can deliver to the blind Gloucester a lesson on how to gaze perspectively. Yet it is significant that even after their eyes have been taught both aged fathers fail to acknowledge the causelessness of the world they inhabit. The spectator's response to the play is divided between the wishful acceptance that emotional engagement can help restructure human relationships and the disheartening experience that the language of the heart may not be an apt answer to the cruelties shown on the stage.

KEYWORDS: *King Lear*, heart, eye, emblems, emotion, perspective view, audience response