

William W. E. Slights. *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare*.

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This book makes an ambitious and timely contribution to both the cultural history of the heart and early modern studies of the body. Thoroughly versed in recent scholarship on the heart and the early modern English body, Slights pursues an interpretive ontology that eschews recent scholarly trends which compartmentalize the body into discrete parts and instead “reintegrate[s] the early modern heart back into the systems that made it intelligible at the time” (4). Accordingly, Slights organizes his study into chapters that focus, respectively, on the

graphic, passionate, narrative, villainous, and Shakespearean hearts. Yet each chapter achieves a virtually seamless, interdisciplinary scope since the “anatomical, theological, and amatory hearts appear” throughout each one (32). His aim is no less than “[r]ecovering the full range of the heart’s significance for the age of Shakespeare” and he does so in a manner that is both erudite and engaging (4).

In his introductory chapter, “A Window on the Heart,” Slights points up the heart’s enduring role as metaphorical window onto the subject. The heart is thus of keen interest to the early modern period’s array of anatomists, theologians, visual artists, and dramatists — and to Slights himself, who cleverly uses the organ as a window onto the tumultuous period between 1550 and 1650. Among the key systems that “made [the heart] intelligible” to early moderns is that of classical humoral theory, which continued to account for physiological states and individual dispositions even as anatomists such as Andreas Vesalius and William Harvey disproved some of Galen’s central theories. Slights also emphasizes how early moderns likewise “drew heavily on biblical heart lore and medieval iconography as a basis for its own mental and material imagery of the heart” (4, 7).

In chapter 2, “Reading the Graphic Heart,” he analyzes heart images that underscore the vast range of early modern heart depictions. Disparate as these images are, they are linked, Slights notes, by “both the tensions and strong bonds that developed during the Reformation through the interplay of anatomy and religion” (42). Thus, George Wither’s emblem, “Speqve metvqve pavet,” which depicts an overheated, impassioned heart caught between the anchor of hope and arrow of fear, Andreas Vesalius’s diagrams in *Fabrica* that display the heart as anatomized organ, and Daniel Cramer’s *Emblemata sacra*, which shows a heart being placed by God into a furnace for purification, call attention to the organ’s centrality in the period’s core discourses and debates. Cramer’s image, for instance, underscores Protestant ideologies about Christian purity and theologians’ efforts to draw focus away from medieval iconographic depictions of Christ’s sacred, violated heart. Indeed, one the book’s strengths is its beautiful illustrations — a carefully-selected trove that accentuates the varied and complex ways in which the heart was being rethought and redeployed in political, religious, and artistic contexts.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the importance of early modern conceptions of the terms *affection* and *motion*, which, Slights notes, imply force and swift change. His emphasis in this chapter — a corrective, in a sense, to current scholarship — is that while this century was indeed characterized by significant changes, these changes tended to be gradual rather than sudden. In fact, building on Eamon Duffy’s arguments, Slights observes that “[f]or these thinkers, cultural change was unimaginable without cultural continuity” (79). In chapter 4, “The Narrative Heart of the Renaissance,” Slights analyzes how “[h]eart symbolism was transposed from a religious arena to an aggressively secular and sexual one” (35). In Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, for example, the heart is the central trope of valor, loyalty, and betrayal while in John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, Annabella’s skewered heart symbolizes her incestuous affair with Giovanni and, aptly, becomes the organ on which he exacts his vengeance against her. Through analyses of selected dramas and

poems, Slights shows that the heart was also a signifier “for the intellectual and emotional turmoil of the age” (131).

Chapter 5 explores the “staged interiority” of the heart, notably the black hearts of villainy that were so seductive to theater audiences and stage characters because they so ardently withheld their secrets from those who sought to probe and understand them. This is one of Slights’s stronger chapters, since he deftly imbricates anatomical discoveries about the heart, “the disillusionment of the Renaissance anatomists attempting to cut to the truth . . . of their subjects,” and the parallel impossibility dramatized on the early modern stage of ever really knowing the truth about a character’s interiority (135). In chapter 6, “Shakespeare and the Cardiocentric Self,” Slights asks whether there is or is not a “Shakespearean heart.” While he explores examples of the heart in some of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets in which the heart figures centrally, Slights never completely answers this query. He does suggest, though, that hearts in Shakespeare’s works become more and more alienated from the rest of the body, which he reads as “sure signs of a tragically disintegrating self” (150). To be sure, much of Shakespeare’s work vividly illustrates the development of a so-called modern self; yet, as Slights’s own text shows, there were numerous artists, scientists, and theologians doing likewise. That said, *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare* is an indispensable addition to early modern studies of the body. Slights maintains a keen interdisciplinary focus throughout his monograph and, in the end, succeeds in giving context and shape to “this enigmatic organ” (32).

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