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The Department of Western Languages and Literatures and the Department of Turkish Language and Literature at Boğaziçi University are pleased to announce the launching of a new journal: METAFOR: The Boğaziçi University Journal of Literary Studies.

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Hey-day in the Blood and Mutiny in the Bones: The Body Image in *Hamlet*

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Abstract

Hamlet has often been regarded, until recent times, as a play exploring the mind and the psyche of its main character; however, this essay aims to argue that it is equally a play about the body. Hamlet seems to be on the verge of a phenomenological crisis. His hopeless calls for his mind to control the body seem to be undermined by the rest of the play. By utilizing phenomenological discussions of the lived body and viscosity as well as Renaissance representations of the human body in philosophical, and literary texts, this paper aims to argue that *Hamlet* presents us a body image, which seems to have a will of its own and is not yet mechanised.

Keywords: Body, Lived body, Viscosity, Phenomenology, *Hamlet*

Kanda Taşkınlık, Kemikte İsyan: *Hamlet*'te Beden İmgesi

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Özet

Hamlet yakın zamana kadar sıklıkla baş karakterinin zihinsel ve ruhsal durumunu irdeleyen bir oyun olarak algılanır. Ancak, bu makale oyunun bir o kadar da beden hakkında olduğunu savunur. *Hamlet* oyun boyunca bir fenomenolojik krizin eşiğinde dolaşmaktadır. Baş karakterin bedeni kontrol etmesi için zihine yaptığı ümitsiz çağırıların altı oyunun geri kalanı tarafından sürekli oyulur. Bu makale, insan bedeninin Rönesans dönemi edebi ve felsefi metinlerdeki temsillerinin yanı sıra yaşayan beden ve derin beden gibi fenomenolojik kavramları kullanarak *Hamlet*'in okuyucuya henüz mekanikleşmemiş, adeta kendi iradesi olan bir beden imgesi sunduğunu göstermeyi amaçlar.

Anahtar Kelime: Beden, Yaşayan beden, Derin beden, Fenomenoloji (Olgubilim), *Hamlet*

...What is a man
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 To fust in us unus'd.¹

With its roots in Platonic discourse,² the body and mind dichotomy dates back to Classical antiquity. However, this issue gained a new dimension with Descartes in the seventeenth century. Cartesian dualism is considered to be the building block of the modern man. Various critics, since the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, considered Hamlet as one of the earliest examples of the modern man: a man of endless reasoning and meditation. *Hamlet* was celebrated as a play exploring the mind and the psyche of its main character;³ however, this essay aims to argue that it is equally a play of the body. 'Born' on the threshold of Cartesian mechanism, Hamlet seems to be on the verge of a phenomenological crisis. His hopeless calls for the mind to control the body seem to be undermined by the rest of the play. The play presents us with a different image of the body, which seems to have a will of its own and is not yet mechanised. Accordingly, this paper will seek to explore the body image in *Hamlet* in connection with the Renaissance representations of the human body in philosophical, religious, and literary texts.

¹William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), IV.iv.33-39.

² Indeed the idea that the body is a prison-house for the soul can be traced even before Plato, back to ancient Orphic cult (c. 6th or 7th century B.C.). It considers the physical body as a 'prison-chamber' or a 'tomb' for the psyche and aims to transcend the physicality of the body through extremely physical ecstatic orgies; however, it was Plato's idealism and rejection of the body that served as the foundation of body-mind struggle throughout the ages.

³ For a survey of when and how *Hamlet* came to be regarded as a play of thought see Margreta De Grazia's "Hamlet's Thoughts and Antics," *Early Modern Culture*. 29.01.2002 *Early Modern Culture* e-Journal Vol.2, 20.10.2017 <http://www.babienko.net/CollegePrep/Assignments/Hamlet/HamletCrit/degrazia.html>.

1 Renaissance Body

The body in the Renaissance had not yet become the modern “Cartesian corpse,”⁴ the automaton without any will power of its own. The body-interior was more complex and chaotic with a mystic nature. For instance, Renaissance medical jargon represented the body as a newfound land whose unknown—and often hostile—depths and caverns were waiting to be discovered and named. While Christopher Columbus was naming discoveries in the New World, anatomists were doing the same in their journey into the body.⁵ The body of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was a territory which expressed, in miniature, the divine artistry of God, as it was the microcosmic reflection of the universe. The mechanistic view, which considers the body as a highly intricate machine and the mind, or sometimes the soul, as the governing force of this machine, had a few more decades to be fully established. This, however, does not mean that there was no distinction between body and mind, but rather the relationship between the two was based on different terms.

Through Neoplatonism, the age-old body-mind/soul struggle resided in the Renaissance understanding of the body. The body was assumed to function as a “vessel of containment” for the “anima,” the essential thinking entity or the soul.⁶ However, this vessel was not a pleasant place of residence for the soul, as it prevents the soul from reaching the celestial realm or, in Platonic terms, the realm of ideas. The body, by its corporeal existence, binds the soul to the physical world, which is only a reduced copy of the ideal world. Thus, on the one hand, the soul tries to tame and control its container; while on the other, it is in a constant effort to escape.

The body was supposed to obey the soul that resided within it; yet in philosophical, religious, and literary representations⁷ of the Renaissance, it is

⁴ For a detailed discussion of how Cartesian idea of the body came about and how it still is the normative understanding of the body in modern medicine see Drew Leder, “A Tale of Two Bodies: the Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body,” *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) 117-129.

⁵ For a further discussion of the colonised body leading into the idea of mechanistic body see Jonathan Sawday *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 22-32.

⁶ Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 16.

⁷ Even political discourses used this struggle as an analogy of the relationship between the rulers and their subjects. The head was always threatened by the potentially rebellious body. The seventeenth century political theorist, Thomas Hobbes explains his governmental theories with this analogy in *Leviathan*. For one of Shakespeare’s several uses of this political analogy see *Coriolanus* act one scene two.

constantly presented with the ability to disobey. The very claim that body and soul were at war, gave the body an attribute as 'equal' enemy to the soul since it was powerful enough to wage war and serve as a prison-house for the latter. Jonathan Sawday points out, both Neo-Platonic philosophy and Calvinistic theology emphasised the "division between the realm of the body and the realm of the soul" by equating it with the distinction between the transitory and eternal lives.⁸ And thus, the theological discourse turned the disobedience of the body from a metaphysical concern into a daily concern that belonged to the "sphere of all civil life."⁹ Similarly, literary representations of the issue seem to attribute to the body a sinister and a rebellious power. For instance, the imagery that Andrew Marvell employs in his "Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body" illustrates the battle in graphic detail. The human physiology evokes the torture dungeons of the inquisition:

Soul O who shall from this Dungeon, raise
A Soul enslav'd so many wayes?...
A Soul hung up, as t'were, in Chains
Of Nerves, and Arteries, and Veins.¹⁰

The body seems to have a will and power of its own. Not only does it refuse to obey, but it also holds the power to captivate and torture its supposed master. The 'hostile' nature of the body becomes clearer in extreme cases such as illnesses. Sawday, in *The Body Emblazoned*, discusses Donne's encounters with his own illness recorded in Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Sawday illustrates how Donne regards his body in a state of "treasonous desire to destroy itself as nobody was capable of understanding what was happening inside his body."¹¹ Though it is acknowledged more clearly in times of crisis, the Renaissance body seemed generally to "live by its own animalistic desires... alien to the sensibility [i.e. the soul] which inhabited it."¹² The key word seems to be "live;" the lived body is on the one hand an entity through which the soul perceives the world; on the other, an entity that refuses to cooperate with reason and is guided by a will of its own.

⁸ Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17

¹⁰ Andrew Marvell, "Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol.1. 7th edn. (New York: Norton, 2000), 1687-8.

¹¹ Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 32-36.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

2 Lived Body

Twentieth century arguments about the lived body present a similar concept from a phenomenological point of view. The notion of the “lived body” initiated by Husserl, and developed by Merleau-Ponty considers the body as the indispensable medium of all perception, as “organ of the will and seat of free movement.”¹³ Even though Husserl, as Don Welton suggests, “is not a philosopher of the body but a philosopher of consciousness,”¹⁴ his discussion on the lived body became a seminal argument in the critique of the Cartesian split. Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, argues that “...the psycho-physical event can no longer be conceived after the model of Cartesian physiology... the union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence.”¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, in his discussion of intentionality, suggests that intentionality arises from “being-in-the world” that is being involved in the world and we do it through our body.¹⁶ Husserl’s “lived body” or Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of intentionality of the flesh attributes the body surface a consciousness arising from its ability to be simultaneously subject and object, the perceiving and the perceived. However, even though the psychic and the physiological are closely intertwined in the discussions of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, both thinkers still build their arguments on the idea of two realms.

It is Drew Leder who carries the argument a step further. In her essay, “Flesh and Blood: a Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” she argues that an underlying dimension of Viscerality should be added to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of flesh. She suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s flesh refers generally to the sensorimotor functions of body surface, and cannot represent the whole body. There is, however, another dimension of vegetative functions inside the flesh that have great impact on the working of the sensory organs. She calls this dimension the “Visceral” and associates it with blood. Leder claims that “the Visceral cannot be properly said to belong to the subject: it is a power that traverses me,

¹³ Edmund Husserl, “Material Things in Their Relation to the Aesthetic Body,” in *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 29.

¹⁴ Don Welton, “Soft, Smooth Hands: Husserl’s Phenomenology of the Lived-Body” *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings* ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 39.

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “*Phenomenology of Perception*.” Trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112-171.

granting me life in ways I have never fully willed or understood.”¹⁷ Visceral dimension is not under the control of the conscious ‘I,’ hence, phenomenologically distinct from “the body-as-visibility.” Yet, it is intertwined with the latter through its life giving functions. Leder emphasises the uncanny nature of the visceral in similar terms with John Donne’s experience of his treasonous body when she argues that “a world of organic, autonomous powers circulate within my visceral depths. Their otherness haunts the ‘I,’ surfacing at times of illness or approaching death.”¹⁸ Leder’s explanation of the blood dimension of the ‘lived body’ has the uncanny characteristic that haunted the Renaissance soul. It exists and functions according to its own will, evading the grasp and control of the conscious ‘I,’ whether that ‘I’ is the ‘I can’ of the lived body or the ‘I think’ of the Cartesian cogito.

3 Unruly Body in *Hamlet*

The body image in *Hamlet* seems to have a will of its own controlling and manipulating reason instead of being supervised by it. Hamlet seems to be experiencing an almost Cartesian crisis due to his inability to accept a body that lives under the yoke of its animalistic desires, especially if that body belongs to his mother. Hamlet’s obsession with his mother’s body and her sexuality seems to dominate the play more than his father’s murder and his revenge. Indeed, he often considers murder and incest as a single crime merged into one another. Hamlet cannot come to terms with Gertrude’s marriage. The sexual relationship between Gertrude and Claudius, labelled as incestuous—thus unnatural—, is described in graphic detail by Hamlet and the ghost several times in the play. Hamlet refers to flesh with disgust and his descriptions are laden with bestial imagery that not only adds to the ‘monstrosity’ of the relationship but also emphasises the lack of the control of reason. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet is enraged about the “wicked speed” that his mother lay on “incestuous sheets” and remarks that “a beast that wants discourse of reason would’ve mourned longer.”¹⁹ In the so-called ‘closet scene’ he verbally attacks his mother violently and expresses his disgust with the grossness of sexuality using similar imagery: “...live in the rank sweat of an enseam’d bed,/ Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love/ Over the nasty sty!”²⁰ The ghost refers to their marriage in

¹⁷ Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: a Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty,” *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings* ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publ., 1999) 203.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), I.ii.150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, III.iv.92-4.

parallel terms: “lust...will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage.”²¹ The revolting nature of the beast in question has less to do with its lack of reason than its carnal desire that seems to have a life of its own.

Hamlet’s obsession with his mother’s flesh will be reflected on Ophelia and women in general in the so-called ‘nunnery scene.’ In order to not be like women who lure men with their sensual tricks, Hamlet advises Ophelia to be “as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,”²² in other words to freeze her flesh and render it lifeless. Indeed, Ophelia’s chastity is a crucial issue in the play. It is set forth as early as act one, scene three by Laertes’ warnings followed by Polonius’ outburst, which present Ophelia’s virginity as a material commodity. Ophelia’s “chaste treasure,”²³ using a common analogy, is referred to as the bud that can be corrupted by a canker before it blooms, and throughout the play Ophelia and her maidenhead are associated with flowers. When she dies, Laertes suggests an almost grotesque fusion: “Lay her i’th’ earth,/ and from her fair and unpolluted flesh/ may violets spring...”²⁴ In the play’s imagery, while sexual body is bestial, virgin body is vegetative; thus associated with creatures that are supposedly lesser in rank than animals in the great chain of being. Ophelia’s young flesh will disintegrate and breed flowers while Gertrude’s mature flesh, in Hamlet’s perception, is worse than a “beast that wants discourse of reason,”²⁵ particularly because she does not behave appropriate to her age. At her age, her body and sexuality are supposed to be under the control of her reason, her actions should be grounded in reason.

In *Hamlet* the relationship between body and mind is closely related to age. Blood, that represents both life and carnal appetites is supposed to be checked by soul as one gets older. Laertes, when commenting on Hamlet’s love for Ophelia, makes use of the popular Renaissance understanding that blood is the “seat of emotions, of passion as opposed to reason.”²⁶ Laertes calls Hamlet’s love “a fashion and a toy in blood”²⁷ suggesting its transient, trifling and carnal nature. Then he moves onto another common analogy, body as the temple of the soul, to argue that in maturity mind and soul become more in control of the body²⁸ and hence once governed by his reason, the prince will remember his royal duties and leave Ophelia.

²¹ Ibid., I.v.55-7.

²² Ibid., III.i.137-8.

²³ Ibid., I.iii.30.

²⁴ Ibid., V.i.232-3.

²⁵ Ibid., I.ii.150.

²⁶ See notes to the Arden edition of *Hamlet*, 440.

²⁷ Ibid., I.iii.6.

²⁸ Ibid., I.iii.10-4.

Gertrude's sexuality is disgusting for Hamlet not only because it is with her husband's brother, but also because it is unseemly for a woman of her age. Hamlet accuses his mother by reversing Laertes' argument:

You cannot call it love; for at your age
 The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble
 And waits upon judgement and what judgement
 Would step from this to this? Sense sure you have
 Else could you not have motion; but sure that sense
 Is apoplex'd... Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
 Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all...²⁹

Not only Gertrude's eyes, ears, hands and nose, but also her blood and "matron's bones"³⁰ are in rebellion. In other words, both her flesh/body surface and her entire viscera form a creature that needs to be tamed. The way this 'creature' reacts is so inexplicable by natural causality that, she must have been possessed by the devil. Hamlet is sure that she still has sense perception as she has motion; however, the intentionality of motility, supposedly grounded in reason, seems to fail in controlling the blood. The visceral dimension seems to have its own way; it is governed neither by reason nor by wisdom that comes with age. Indeed, the aging body seems to have negative effects on the mind rather than increased wisdom. Hamlet's conversation with Polonius, in act two scene two, draws a grotesque picture of old age: "old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams..."³¹ The body decays and the mind deteriorates in old age. As Leder suggests, in those moments the uncanny "otherness [of the visceral that] haunts the 'I'"³² becomes more visible.

The play is closely concerned with the notion of death and decay, both physical and metaphorical. One aspect of decay in the play is that which "is rotten in the state of Denmark,"³³ in other words, corruption arising from murder and sexual appetite. Another aspect is physical death and the decaying body in the cycle of life. While the conscious 'I' can have some semblance of control over the former, it is utterly powerless over the latter. One of the most striking

²⁹ Ibid., III.iv.68-79.

³⁰ Ibid., III.iv.83.

³¹ Ibid., II.ii.197-200.

³² Drew Leder, "Flesh and Blood: a Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty," *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings* ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publ., 1999), 205.

³³ William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), I.iv.90.

instances that juxtaposes the two forms of decay is when Hamlet tells Polonius to keep his daughter away from the sun:

Hamlet: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

Polonius: I have, my Lord.

Hamlet: Let her not walk i'th' sun. Conception is a blessing,
But as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't.³⁴

The life giving quality of the sun is, on the one hand, associated with male fertility and on the other, by the analogy of conception, with breeding maggots that will rot the body into a carrion. Moreover, as Harold Jenkins argues in the relevant footnote of the Arden edition, carrion not only refers to the dead carcass but also to live flesh “and especially flesh contemptuously regarded as available for sexual pleasure.”³⁵ Thus, the imagery intricately associates death and decay with carnality. Nevertheless, gruesome as it may sound, the decaying flesh and viscera have the power to breed new life from death.

The play treats death simultaneously as a natural biological phenomenon and as an existential issue. In act four, scene three Hamlet philosophises, like a court jester, on the dead body of Polonius: “A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.”³⁶ On the one hand the passage refers to the physiological transformation of bodies in the food chain; on the other, to the nothingness of social hierarchies, identity roles and worldly existence. The decaying body of “a king [according to Hamlet] may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.”³⁷ Later in the graveyard, among the remains of decaying bodies, Hamlet again comments on the transformation that bodies undergo after death. The graphic details of how bodies disintegrate under the earth and come to acquire a sight and smell that will rise one’s “gorge,”³⁸ increases the morbidity of physicality. The meditation again takes on an existential nature as Hamlet imagines great figures of history turning into loam and being used for our petty daily needs.³⁹

However, death for Hamlet is often a way to escape from the prison of his soul, the flesh which he considers in his first soliloquy as “solid” or “sullied.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Ibid., II.ii.181-5.

³⁵ Ibid., 246.

³⁶ Ibid., IV.iii.27-8.

³⁷ Ibid., IV.iii.30.

³⁸ Ibid., V.i.181.

³⁹ Ibid., V.i.200-210.

⁴⁰ Ibid., I.ii.129. There is a discussion among editors on whether the Quarto or the Folio version of this soliloquy is correct as one reads the word ‘solid’ the other ‘sullied.’ Both words seem to be appropriate to reflect his state of mind.

The body is tainted and corrupt and the imagery of solid flesh melting into dew has the effect of getting rid of the material and becoming ephemeral. Similarly, in the famous “to be or not to be”⁴¹ soliloquy Hamlet explores what will happen if we free our minds from the suffering of the flesh. Is it freedom or escape from existence, which is nothing but bearing “the whips and scorns of time?”⁴² Which is a more courageous act: to die and be “no more”⁴³ or to stay and “take arms against a sea of troubles?”⁴⁴

Hamlet’s dilemma can be explained by the Heideggerian notion of Dasein.⁴⁵ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that “Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself.”⁴⁶ In other words, Dasein understands itself in and through the roles that are always already assigned by the culture within which it dwells. Therefore, its being-in-the-world is always an issue for Dasein and its being is always a potentiality of being. What it is and what it will become is based on projections and possibilities. Existence for Heidegger is this self-interpreting way of being. Thus, Dasein is always in a process of becoming and is only fulfilled when projections end, that is when it dies. Hence, being is nothing. Since one cannot cope with this nothingness, one continues to live in this world of possibilities. Dasein has a tendency to “cover up” the fact that it is solely interpretation, understands itself as having an essential nature and grounds its actions upon this understanding. It is when the world touches Dasein—that is in states of trauma, depression and frustration—its everydayness is shattered and nothing seems to make sense. Those are the moments when Dasein is closest to nothingness, hence the truth.

The world has ‘touched’ Hamlet quite seriously.⁴⁷ Coleridge, in his twelfth lecture of 1811-12, presents Hamlet’s situation as thus: he “is the heir-apparent of a throne: his father dies suspiciously; his mother excluded her son from his throne by marrying his uncle. This is not enough; but the Ghost of the murdered father is introduced to assure the son that he was put to death by his own

⁴¹ Ibid., III.i.56.

⁴² Ibid., III.i.70.

⁴³ Ibid., III.i.61.

⁴⁴ Ibid., III.i.59.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Routledge, 1962), 26-28. Heidegger considers human being as a special entity as it has an understanding of its being; thus, he uses the term Dasein (being-there) for this human way of being.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁷ For a Heideggerian reading of *Hamlet* see Ayşem Seval, “Limit Experiences of Being: Death and Madness in *Hamlet*.” *Studies in English: Proceedings from the 6th International IDEA Conference*. (İstanbul: İstanbul Kültür University Publ., 2012) 300-308.

brother.”⁴⁸ Hamlet’s everydayness has shattered; hence, he constantly problematizes corporeal existence and becomes hostile to flesh. On the one hand, there is a strong desire to escape it as it seems to be unaware of the sufferings of the mind; on the other, an equally powerful desire to master and domesticate the treasonous flesh. Thus, what seems to be the underlying cause of Hamlet’s crisis is a peek at nothingness—or the ‘truth’ in Heideggerian terms. With this experience, the fragility of the self-grounding gesture of an autonomous mind becomes visible. And the resulting anxiety manifests itself as a hopeless attempt to master the lived body which refuses to be tamed.

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⁴⁸ Rhys, Ernest ed. *Coleridge’s Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists* (New York: Everyman, 1914), 475.

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