

# Renaissance Medical Theories: Galenic Humoural Doctrine and the Surgeon's Blade

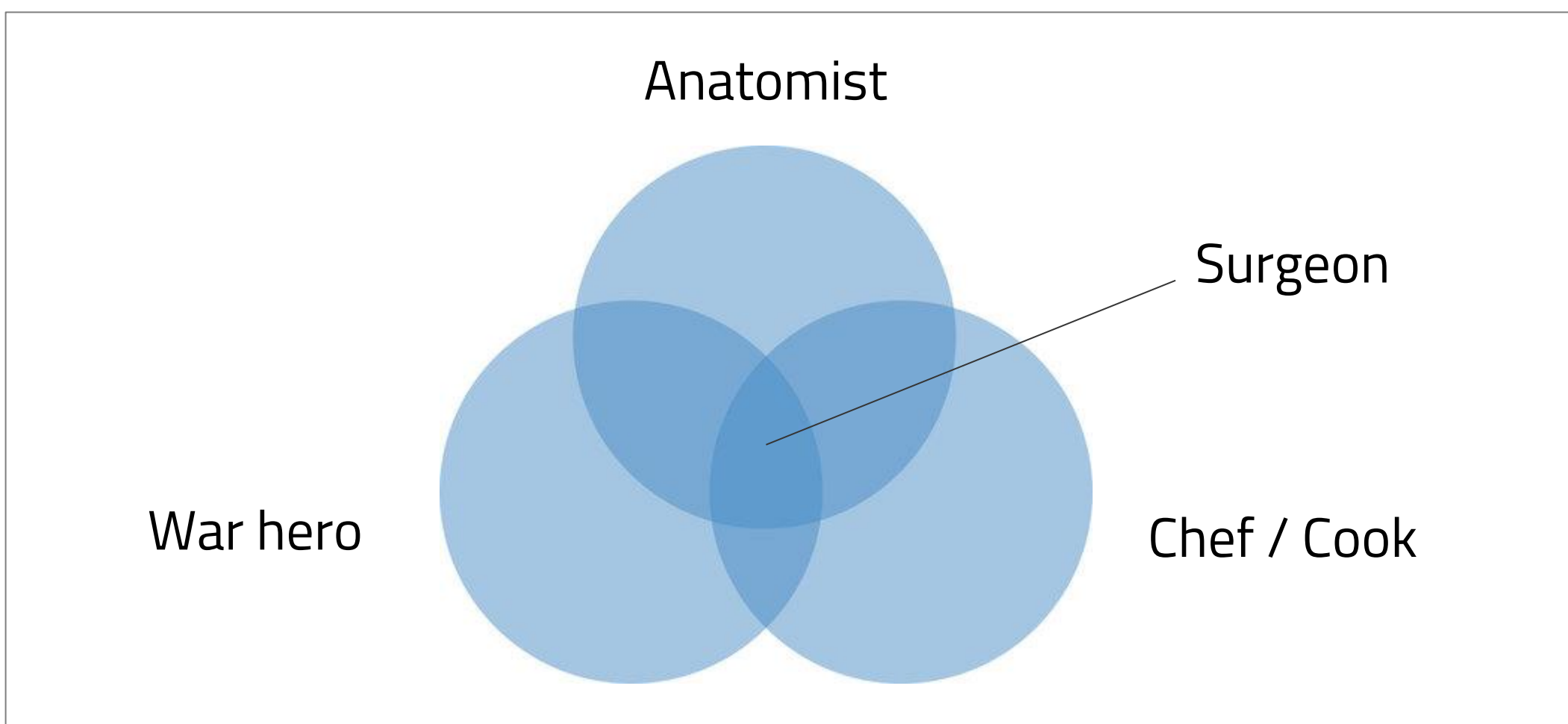
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## Abstract

I argue that in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Titus can be seen in a surgical role, performing Galenic bloodletting for the purposes of cleansing the body politic. I argue that In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare uses Antony to symbolically dramatize the shift in medical theories in Renaissance England.

## Rationale & Framework



In these two plays, we see an act of deliberate murder and paradoxically, they can be seen as an analogy in the forms of medicine – designed to help the body and heal the body. The acts of murder are resonant with these.

## Knowledge Translation Objectives



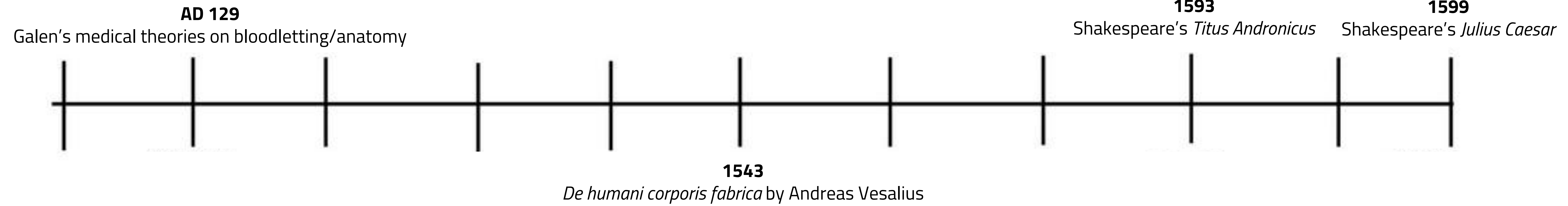
Why include violence, mutilation and similar mature content in his plays? What is the purpose of having excessive gore and what was Shakespeare attempting to communicate with his audience by including it in his narratives?



In a comparison between the two plays, we are looking at the different ways medical professionals engage with the body. On one hand, Titus intervenes in the bodies of Chiron and Demetrius, which is resonant with bloodletting. This is an opportunity to think about why this is the case.



Engagement with Caesar's body evokes different kinds of medical professionals. Shakespeare is dramatizing a shift within the play itself, a move between what the conspirators are doing and how Antony is responding to it. Emblematic of a different way of thinking about the body.



## Research

### Methodology

Conceptualizes the bloodletting scene in *Titus Andronicus* 5.2

**Galenic humoural theory:** "Before the discovery of circulation, before blood was known to flow back to the heart to be replenished and reused."<sup>[1]</sup>

### Secondary Research

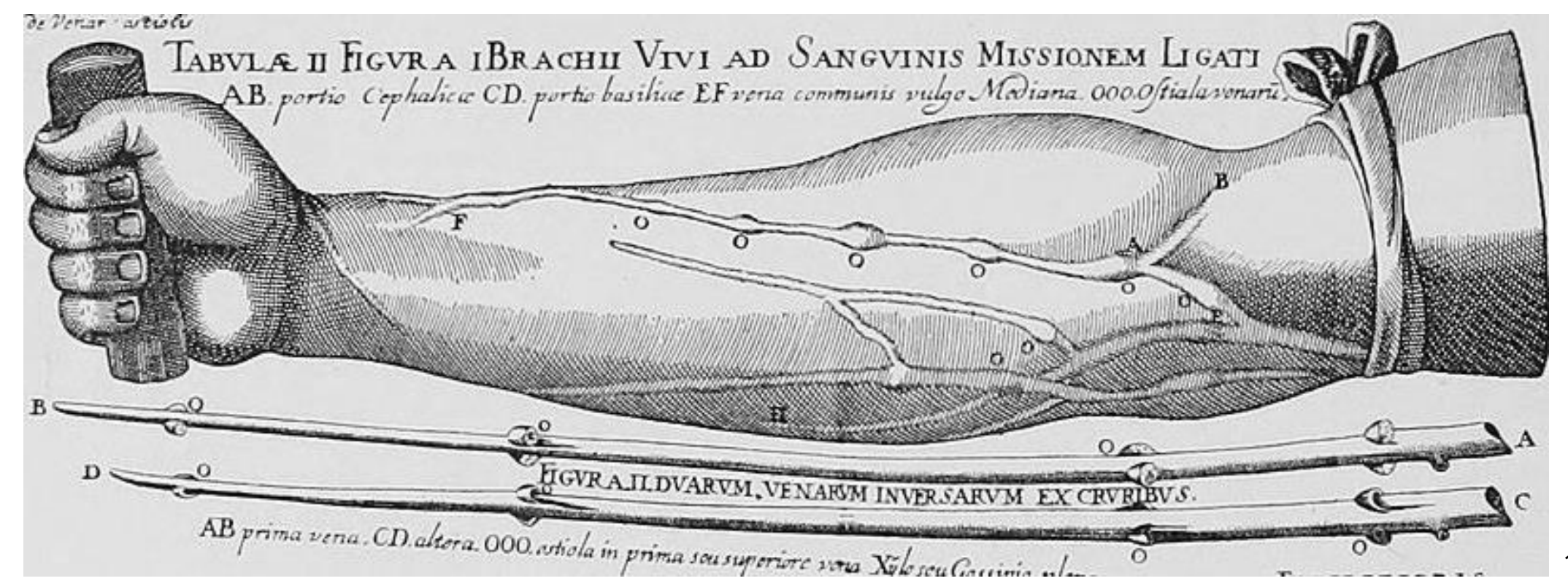


Fig. 1: Tabulae II Figura I Branchii vivi ad Sanguinis Missionem Ligati

**Plebotomy:** blood that is let directly from a vein or artery through a single incision (this was normally called plebotomy, bloodletting, or breathing).<sup>[2]</sup>

### Primary Research

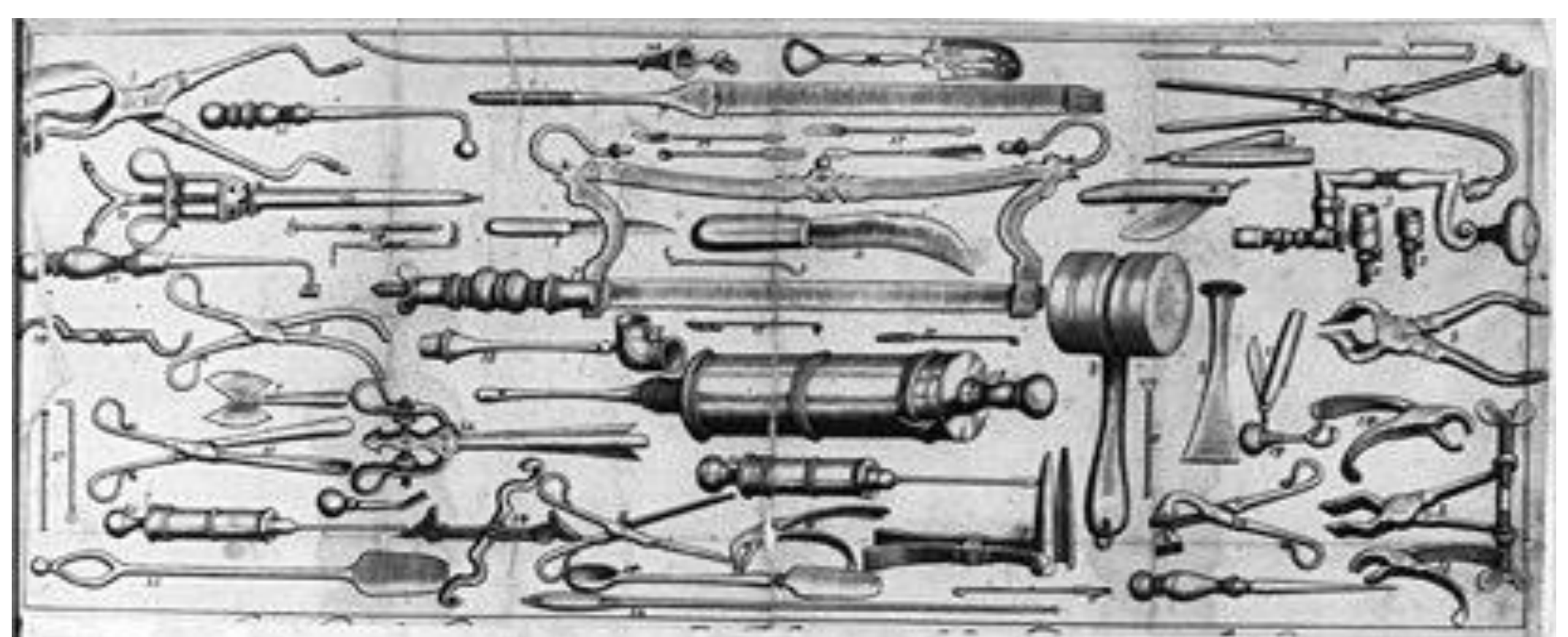


Fig. 2: Diagram of 22 surgical instruments

**Woodall, John Chyrurgerie: (1556)** The ambiguity of Titus' weapon allows for latitude of performance. The interpretation of the tools' nature varies.

## Hypothesis

Galen's anatomical reports remained uncontested until 1543, when printed descriptions and illustrations of human dissections were published in the seminal work *De humani corporis fabrica* by Andreas Vesalius.<sup>[3]</sup>

Shakespeare introduces the changing methodology of thinking about the body into his plays, emblematic of the circulation of continental anatomists who reformed Renaissance England.

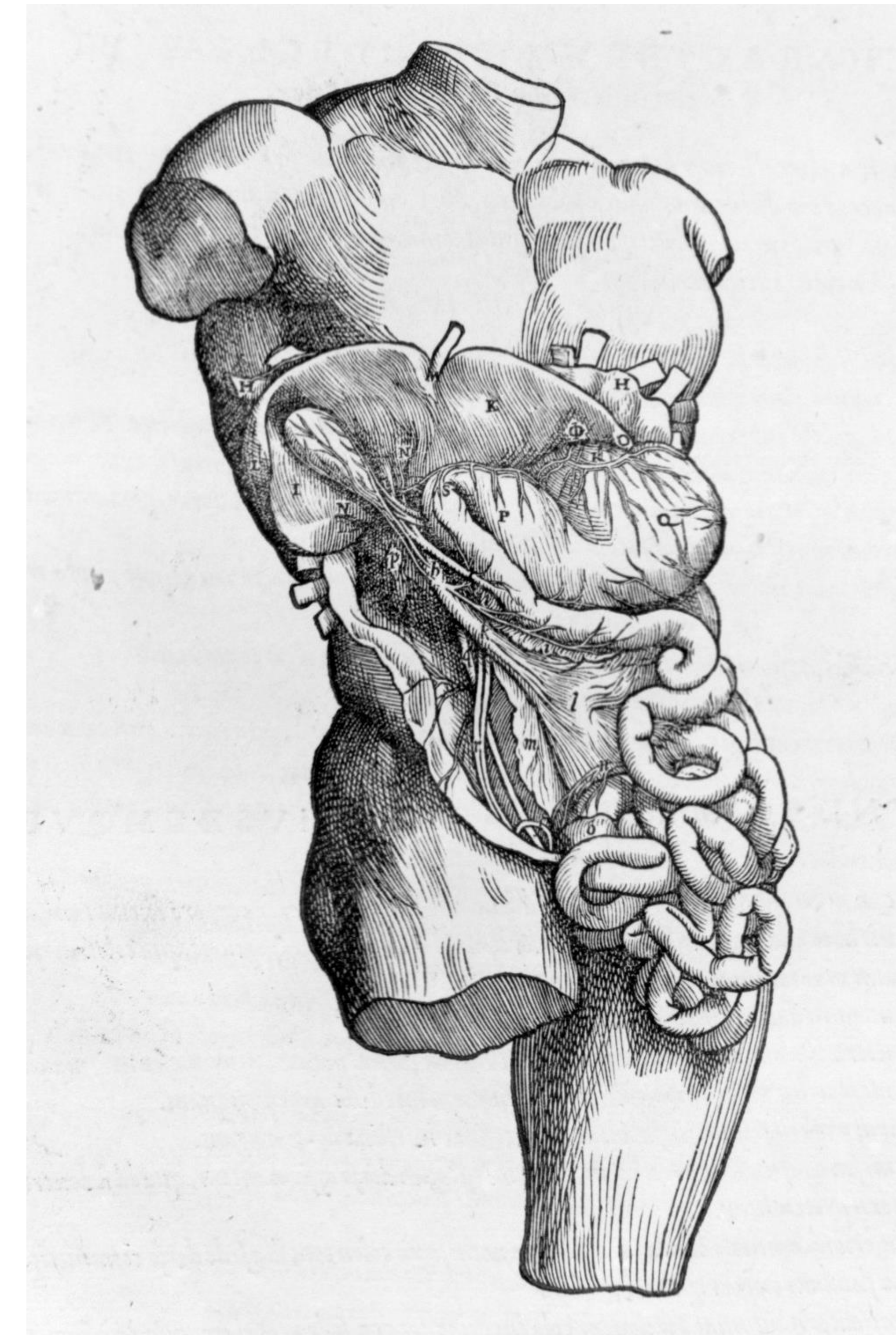


Fig. 3: A. Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), anatomy table

## Conclusion

Titus' surgical intervention through bloodletting is not directed towards Chiron and Demetrius' bodies, but rather serves the interests of the Roman state. In *Julius Caesar*, the motives behind Caesar's assassination parallel Titus' to reflect a surgical approach for political reasons: committing murder, and in doing so, suggesting that the body politic is aided by bloodletting as a guise for healing, evoking the same surgical language.

Aligning with Galenic principles of plethora and cacochymia, Brutus and the conspirators wish to rid the excess that causes an imbalance. Mirroring *Titus Andronicus*, they engage in the bloodletting of Caesar as a means to purge perceived threats and restore republican order. This parallel showcases Shakespeare's exploration of acts of murder as surgical tools used to cleanse and stabilize the body politic.

Antony's oration in *Julius Caesar* challenges the notion of bloodletting as a surgical act for the state's wellbeing. By analyzing Caesar's forensics, Antony suggests a more literary interpretation, offering a verbal autopsy on the understanding of the body instead.

While bloodletting through surgical interventions on the body aim to remove threats from Rome, a parallel runs in the political landscape of Renaissance England. Shakespeare's depiction of bloodletting and anatomy prompts the audience to consider phlebotomy in the sense of dramatizing the shift in medical knowledge toward understanding and healing the body.

Shakespeare's examination of the bloodletting–body politic connection in his works find resonance in contemporaneous political discourse, where similar imagery is used to describe events occurring in the Renaissance. This metaphorical framework could be adopted by commentators to analyze current political situations, which gives Shakespeare's interrogation of the metaphor topical implications that characterize later thinking.

## Acknowledgements

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