

Jörgen Helm, Karin Stukenbrock, eds. *Anatomie: Sektionen einer medizinischen Wissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2003. 323 pp. EUR 48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-08107-8.



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Cutting-Edge Scholarship?

Anatomy is a venerable field of medical historical investigation. There is no paucity of magisterial treatments of, for instance, the contributions of Vesalius or even of the whole range of medieval and early modern anatomy and anatomists. While what might be termed the study of academic anatomy (of the great anatomists and “medical progress”) for a long time dominated the subject, historians interested in the history of the body (*Körpergeschichte*), of gender and sexuality, and forensic medicine, have moved aggressively into the field and repeatedly updated its relevance for medical and non-medical historians alike. Indeed, as the editors of this volume note, “virtually no other field offers more material to set one thinking about the social, political, and cultural conditions of academic research.” “Anatomy is in,” they argue, in an even wider sense; in the art of Gunther von Hagen’s *Körperwelten* and in films such as *Anatomie* and *Anatomie 2* (p. 7). So goes the introduction to a collection of essays that sprang from an international symposium held in 2001. While the subject of that conference was the perhaps unjustifiably obscure Abraham Vater, the articles that emerged from it—and which appear here—by no means narrowly focus on either Wittenberg or Vater, although both figure prominently. Rather,

the editors promise in their opening a more expansive look at anatomy and history. Thus, one question to be asked here is: does the volume fulfill the promise (at least implicit) of cutting-edge scholarship? The five sections that make up the book are each devoted to one particular way of employing anatomy to lay bare broader social, cultural, and political issues and expose their meanings: preparations and collections; concepts, research, and discoveries; learning and teaching; society, politics, and justice; and metaphor, poetry, and literature. Only the last of these disappoints.

The original impetus for the conference and volume—Abraham Vater—appears in Jörgen Helm’s opening article. It is a biographical treatment with a deeper methodical purpose expressed in Helm’s premise that the life of an individual can be used as the jumping off point for a consideration of larger historical processes. Thomas Schnalke then picks up this micro-biographical perspective in “anatomizing” the correspondence that passed between Vater and a Nuremberg physician and anatomist, Christoph Jacob Trew. Both articles stress the value of closely examining how individuals contoured careers and structured communication networks. Moreover, in their private epistolary exchanges, they also actually

developed the basis for their publications. Yet while neither topic, nor approach, nor conclusion is especially surprising—or, for that matter, strikingly original—both essays augment our comprehension of how the academic world of the eighteenth century worked through personal relations and relationships. The following two contributions in this section, on anatomical preparations and on the “Venuses” of Vienna—wax figures—carry us into the regions where art and artifice, technique and taste converge. The first deepens our understanding of how preparations were made and used while conveying an appreciation of both the artistry (the preparations were, in fact, not only models and teaching tools, but also “small works of art,” p. 76) and the painstaking techniques. The second deploys a broader and more robust interpretive framework. The author rescues waxwork forms from the unjustifiable relegation they have suffered to the realm of “not art” and speculates on how the “beautiful corpse” developed as a “culturally determined artifact” that not only reflected social and cultural standards (consider the links between death and the erotic in the work of the marquis de Sade) but that also opened a suitable field in which these perceptions could develop (p. 95). These treatments of the plasticity and multivocality of bodies are persuasive but not especially original. Rather, they capably and creatively build on older works that link anatomy and art.

The following four essays on research and discoveries parse the relationship between pure science—or pure anatomy—and practice, as, for example, in assessing to what extent a particular anatomy of the eye informed the treatment of cataracts and glaucoma. Marion Maria Ruisinger teases out the complex interactions between theory and practice by eschewing simple linear connections, eventually concluding that the practicing physician in question here, Lorenz Heister, “shaped his medical practice” (*[die] Gestaltung seines Ärztlichen Angebot*) more according to the expectations of his potential patients (whose understanding of body processes remained humoralist) rather than according to his “academic understanding” (p. 122). This sensitively done piece sharpens our perspectives on the various factors—social, economic, academic, and personal—that joined to contour medical practice without relying on facile dichotomies of theory and *praxis*. Likewise deftly done, if more single-mindedly dedicated to explicating research processes, are the articles on Morgagni and the rise of pathological anatomy and on the difficulties attendant on, and the results of, experimentation on nerves and irritability.

In the next section, Hans-Theodor Koch’s discussion of anatomical instruction at Wittenberg traces the roots

of the eighteenth-century situation back to the end of the fifteenth century and works carefully to reconstruct the often obscure history of the teaching of anatomy. But a rather tedious biblical “begetting” in the listing of anatomists and their successors results in an uninspired, mechanical presentation. Sonia Horn’s contribution on anatomical instruction for nonacademic practitioners in Vienna, midwives, surgeons, and a broader “public,” is also chronologically organized, but it addresses a less well-known subject and thus fleshes out our view of the ways in which nonacademic practitioners, too, were influenced by anatomical teaching. We sometimes forget that non-physician practitioners often possessed an enviable store of practical experience *and* theoretical knowledge.

The two articles that comprise the penultimate part on society, politics, and justice were, in this reviewer’s opinion, the meatiest and, overall, the most satisfying. One, Gerhard Ammerer’s study of forensic medicine, revisits a topic that has already received a fair amount of attention; the other, by Karin Stukenbrock, takes up the problem of how raw material for dissection—corpses—was actually obtained. Stukenbrock’s topic may seem marginal, or even ghoulish, but her conclusions are striking and she does not pursue the path one might have anticipated: this is not (primarily) a story about the horrors dissection evoked in ordinary people nor does it titillate by recounting gruesome tales of resurrection men. Rather, Stukenbrock postulates that factors external to the university itself—the procurement and provision of corpses—had a pronounced effect on the reputation individual institutions could amass (depending on whether or not they could obtain sufficient raw materials) and also set the parameters in which knowledge developed. Ammerer surveys how over the course of the late eighteenth century the role of forensic medicine expanded and forcefully altered the discourse on infanticide in two fora: that of law and the enlightened public sphere. By 1803, this interaction had contributed to a shift in practice in Austria that softened laws and public attitudes toward women suspected of infanticide.

The volume closes with two rather bizarre selections: one on the vivisection of humor in a work of Jean Paul and the other on the anatomy of tears in Pietism, the Enlightenment, and the sentimental literature of the late eighteenth century. While one appreciates the desire of the editors to expand the relevance of anatomical knowledge beyond its obvious boundaries, this reviewer found these attempts to link the more sober (and more solid) studies of parts 1-4 with the final section addressing the

metaphorical context of “anatomizing” forced and unconvincing. Moreover, unlike the clearly written contributions characteristic of the volume as a whole, here the language twists in on itself and one often finds that rhetoric stands (inadequately) in the place of analysis. It is not so much that metaphorical uses of anatomy or body imagery are inappropriate or wrong-headed topics here, but rather that neither the authors nor the editors make a convincing case for their inclusion. Instead, these essays

seem curiously disembodied as they float about detached from the principal themes of the volume. Is this, then, cutting-edge scholarship? Sometimes. Still, the strongest pieces in the volume remain those that perhaps try the least to be inventive, that rely most heavily on industrious digging in the sources, and that build on the firm foundations of older, but by no means obsolete, scholarship.

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