



Richard Sugg. *Murder after Death: Literature and Anatomy in Early Modern England.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 264 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4509-5.

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Body Works in Early Modern England

In the last decade or so, literary scholars and historians have become increasingly interested in the relationship between the burgeoning field of anatomical study, inspired by Andreas Vesalius, and its impact on various literary genres. Richard Sugg's new work makes a significant contribution to this body of scholarship. Building on the work of Jonathan Sawday, among others, Sugg explores the uses writers made of anatomy, the relationship between dissection and cannibalism, and the implications for understanding the soul that occurred as physicians and surgeons probed the body's interior ever more deeply.

Though he shies away from asserting an immediate cause-and-effect relationship between anatomical references in literary works and the somewhat later publication of the first major English work of anatomy in the Vesalian tradition, Sugg suggests that the works of writers, inspired by the possibilities of this new science, initially influenced English anatomists. He clearly demonstrates that the language of anatomy and its associated vocabulary quickly permeated sermons, plays, and other works. So rapid was its acceptance that "the body must be seen as actively invading the English literary imagination" (p. 2). So pervasive was this "invasion" that the words "section" and "analysis" came to be closely identified, if not essentially synonymous, with "dissection" (p. 3). Sugg argues that Lenten sermons in London reflected this new language, though because his sample size is small (thirteen of only twenty-one dated sermons over a seventy-one-year period), this link would be better seen

as suggestive rather than conclusive.

Sugg's discussion of the attitudes toward dissections and the dissected reveals that dissection possessed a multifaceted meaning, though one that changed over time. Authors subjected villainous characters to the ignominy of dissections as a way of punishing their transgressions, mirroring the increasing public fascination with bodies of executed criminals. The meaning of dissections, though, was ambiguous, at least in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Authors exploited the association of "anatomies" with "the power of taboos whose sheer emotional force makes them frequently spill beyond easy categorization" (p. 35). The strongest of these taboos was the connection between dissection and cannibalism. Sugg discusses the various meanings surrounding cannibalism before arguing that for early modern authors and audiences, dissection ultimately served to "disempower supposedly cannibalistic adversaries" (p. 67). Ultimately, however, anatomy escaped the negative associations of cannibalism both because dissections were performed by those with rarefied knowledge and because those involved could "claim to act for the public good" (p. 68). Still, Sugg argues that "the anatomized body was able to act at least partially as an iconic substitute for that older, unashamedly magical version of the Eucharist" (p. 71).

Dissection also offered men control over women's bodies and sexuality. Sugg acknowledges that "female sexuality was doubly shrouded in mystery from a male

point of view; as well as lacking a systematic anatomical account, it was enclosed, during the time of gestation and birth, by an entirely female community” (p. 111). Anatomy offered men “a supposedly legitimate and clarifying male technique especially powerful in its claims to fix, expose, and label what was hidden and mysterious” (p. 115). While Sugg’s argument is persuasive, it might have been even stronger had he tied it to the efforts of the Royal College of Physicians to control women’s sexuality by asserting its authority over the actual process of childbirth, working to marginalize midwives and replace them with male physicians. Establishing such a connection would have also strengthened his contention that literary works led the way for medical change in early modern England.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, an important shift occurred. In the early decades, anatomists frequently purported to discover anatomical features that reflected both the particular personality traits of the deceased and evidence of God’s design. The autopsy of James I indicated a wise, but melancholic character, and King Lear’s plaint that his daughter Regan was “hard-hearted” referred not just to her behavior but also to the physical state of her heart (p. 106). Perhaps most important, careful study of anatomical features revealed “intriguing clues pointing the way to salvation” (p. 96). As the century progressed, however, an increasing emphasis on mechanism and empiricism challenged earlier interpretations, and anatomists began to reject particular/individual explanations in favor of a more normative or standardized understanding of the body. Furthermore, by mid-century, “the body [had] now grown too defiantly, purely material to be easily manipulated by religious rhetoric” (p. 142). The failure to pinpoint the precise location of the soul posed a real threat to those who believed in an “anatomically verifiable continuity between body and soul” (p. 159).

While autopsies gained increasing acceptance in

early modern England, vivisection remained beyond the pale, both in literature and in reality. Not only was vivisection seen as eradicating the line between humans and animals, but Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) also made clear links between vivisection, the feminization of the male victim, and the ritual cruelty of the Jews who perpetrated the crime. Even the rise of experimentation failed to redeem vivisection from condemnation. The link between vivisection and more mainstream dissection seems tenuous, despite Sugg’s attempts to argue that the vivisectioning surgeons in a Michael Drayton sonnet represent “an emerging strand of the medical attitude ... a necessary, temporary detachment from human suffering ... [that] [b]y the late eighteenth century ... had become a distinctive and unapologetic badge of medical, and especially surgical, identity” (p. 191). That such a detachment developed is clearly established; that it was at least in part the product of deliberately inflicted cruelty seems less convincing.

Sugg concludes by briefly discussing the shift from “soul” to “mind,” a change occasioned by the failure of anatomists to pinpoint the location of the soul within the body. Much of the conclusion, however, serves to raise, rather than to resolve, questions about this soul to mind transformation. Sugg explains that he raises these questions in anticipation of answering them in the future.

Overall, this is an interesting and compelling work. The inclusion of two appendices—“English Literary Anatomies to 1650” and “Anatomy Allusions in Dated London Sermons to 1642”—provides useful citations. The absence of a bibliography, however, is less welcome. Some readers may also be distracted by the author’s frequent use of questions to further his discussion—in some places, as many as three or four per paragraph. Despite these drawbacks, *Murder after Death* is still a valuable addition to the literature on the connection between anatomy and culture in early modern England.

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