



Representations of Early Modern Anatomy and the Human Body. Durham, UK: Sebastian Pranghofer; Centre for the History of Medicine and Disease, 22.06.2007.

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Representations of Early Modern Anatomy and the Human Body

That the historical analysis of visual representations is a vital and important field of enquiry was recently shown by the 4th Centre for the History of Medicine and Disease workshop at Durham University. The Wellcome Trust-sponsored workshop discussed *Representations of Early Modern Anatomy & the Human Body* and aimed at contributing to a better understanding of the body in its historical and cultural context. The focus was on visualisations of human bodies from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries as represented in anatomical textbooks, public dissections, in private anatomical collections as well as in popular traditions and narratives. The speakers' papers were as varied as the interdisciplinary background of the audience, ranging from medicine, anthropology and archaeology to the history of medicine and visual culture studies. The sessions, which were arranged thematically, dealt with the cultural context (session one), the production of knowledge (session two) and theoretical and methodological reflections on the subject (session three including the final discussion). The fact that the papers had previously been circulated provided the rare opportunity to discuss each contribution in depth, for most of the time was spent on subsequent discussions rather than the presentations.

Cultural Context and Significance of Early Modern Anatomy

Session one's first speaker was **Rina Knoeff** (Leiden University) who talked about the fascinating subject of *Animals Inside: Anatomy, Interiority and Virtue in the Early Modern Dutch Republic*. Beginning with the story of an early eighteenth-century Dutch woman who vomited

a little dog as the alleged source of her illness, Knoeff argued that such cases should not be taken metaphorically but rather represent the way that early modern people actually experienced and imagined the otherwise invisible inner workings of their bodies. The perceived living and breeding of animals inside thereby embodied contemporary cultural ideas about illness and pain which increasingly merged with, but were never wholly replaced by, the disseminated medical-anatomical knowledge. In fact, as the example of the Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731) shows, professional knowledge and anatomical research were equally influenced by laypeople's common experience of small animals living inside their body. Ruysch, who had attended the woman, preserved the little dog and displayed it in his anatomical collection cabinet. In her conclusion, Knoeff placed these early modern phenomena in the specific cultural and political context of the early eighteenth-century Dutch republic in which the material body and wealth of the nation was equally threatened by little animals (pile worms) attacking and destroying dikes and houses.

The discussion of Knoeff's paper elaborated on the historian's difficulty in grasping the contemporary framework for such stories. Instead of attempting to rationalise the early modern fears of animals living inside the body in modern terms, historians should regard these fears as real within their specific historical and cultural context. The belief of animals generating inside bodies was specifically bound to Dutch politics, Protestantism and possible religious connotations of the stories them-

selves. A comparison with similar accounts in counter-reformation Europe, where animals inside were mostly explained as invaders of the body rather than generating from within, was considered a fruitful and promising path for further research.

However, the closely linked but more general question was: How in retrospect can we extract meaning from such stories? It was generally agreed to emphasise the variety of historically specific perceptions of the body. This was underlined by a comparison which was made earlier in the discussion and which tried to understand early modern 'animals inside' in relation to modern (urban) myths, for instance of animals creeping up sewers and invading human civilisation. Although the shared symbolic representation of animals as a potential threat was acknowledged, animals and animality in modern society were viewed as a projection field of diffuse fears rather than as a metaphor for a tangible threat to a society in economic decline, such as in the Dutch republic of the early eighteenth century.

The next speaker was **Simon Chaplin** (Royal College of Surgeons of England) with a paper on *Exemplary bodies: public and private dissections in Georgian London*. Drawing upon Jürgen Habermas's distinction of the public and private sphere since the eighteenth century, Chaplin provided a fresh perspective on anatomy in Georgian London. He compared the public dissections of convicted criminals at the Surgeon's Hall from 1752 onwards with the privately conducted post-mortem dissections of wealthy patients by surgeon-anatomists like William and John Hunter. Chaplin linked these two kinds of 'exemplary bodies' to the opposing conceptions of public and private and their inherent implications for the establishment of medical authority in eighteenth-century London. The professional authority of anatomists was thereby increasingly constituted by the dissemination of post-mortem findings in famous private clients through newspapers and medical journals, rather than by dishonourable public dissections of criminals.

The discussion began with the interesting question of whether the single bones often encountered during excavations of early modern hospital cemeteries were remnants of dissections. Chaplin answered this in the affirmative by explaining that medical students of the Enlightenment period often bought particular parts of the body for dissection; thus the respective skeleton was hardly ever buried as a whole.

The main issue in the discussion of Chaplin's paper

were the possible reasons for the explicit wish of wealthy or famous clients for post-mortem dissections. Since the results were often published in newspapers and journals, it was suggested that the patients might have seen the publication of their own dissection as some sort of extended 'obituary' or memorial. This led to an interesting comparison of eighteenth-century public engagement with anatomy and today's newly risen interest in the anatomical body. It was agreed upon that the people's interest was as persistent as it had been in the eighteenth century but that the public had no longer access to anatomy in the same way, for instance via the actual dissection of a human body 'with the exception of Gunther v. Hagen's infamous telecast dissections. The above-mentioned private post-mortem dissections might have been one step towards a 'privatisation' or removal of practical anatomy from the public sphere.

The Construction and Representation of Anatomical Knowledge

The second session began with **Sebastian Pranghofer** (Centre for the History of Medicine and Disease, Durham University) who gave a paper on the *The Visual Representation of the rete mirabile in Early Modern Anatomy*. The *rete mirabile* used to play a central role in traditional Galenic physiology and was traditionally described as a net of vessels at the base of the brain. Although its existence and physiological function was increasingly doubted by anatomists from the sixteenth century onwards, the *rete mirabile* remained a vital part of anatomical discourse well into the eighteenth century, although its relevance declined continuously. As an anatomical object, it reflected the ambiguous status of the human body since the general uncertainty about this allegedly vital organ was also reflected in its visual representations. The absence of a consistent iconography was seen as partly responsible for ongoing debates about the *rete mirabile's* nature and function. However, even sceptical anatomists such as Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) continued to copy and disseminate illustrations of the 'wonderful net' (of vessels) in their anatomical textbooks. By the end of the eighteenth century, the *rete mirabile* had nevertheless become obsolete in human anatomy; although Pranghofer interestingly pointed out its re-emergence in recent case descriptions of neurosurgical pathology.

The discussion reflected at first on the curious re-surfacing of the *rete mirabile* in recent medical/neurosurgical discourse, which was seen as an indication for continuity rather than a complete dismissal from anatomical discourse. It was suggested

that it might be worth (re)searching for the 'wonderful net' in nineteenth-century medical-anatomical discourses. Pranghofer also linked the changing status of the *rete mirabile* to the disciplinary changes in anatomy and physiology, and its ambiguous nature to the fact that it often remained unclear whether the respective anatomists referred to animal or human bodies. Subsequently the discussion turned to the issue of the human-animal distinction as mirrored in the discourse about the *rete mirabile* and whether these distinctions might have been more blurred prior to the rise of science in the Enlightenment period.

Pranghofer's presentation was followed by **Sachiko Kusukawa** (Trinity College, Cambridge) paper on *Andreas Vesalius and the canonisation of the human body*. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Kusukawa herself could unfortunately not attend the workshop, but had made sure in advance that her paper was introduced (which was done by Iona McCleery, Wellcome Trust Research Fellow at the CHMD) and discussed. In her paper, Kusukawa analysed the interrelation between images, texts and objects in Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543). She showed how Renaissance scholars positioned themselves in the Galenic tradition while at the same time directing the reader's gaze towards their own understanding and interpretation of the idealised human body. This fitted nicely with the preceding paper with its account of Vesalius and other early modern anatomists. The discussion therefore took up many issues featuring in both papers. One of these issues related to the important question of what we actually see in early modern images of the body that are no longer familiar to us. The fact that we no longer inhabit the early modern gaze had for instance been fairly obvious during Pranghofer's presentation in which he felt obliged to highlight the *rete mirabile* to enable the audience to see it in early modern illustrations. The subsequent discussion accordingly centred on the question of whether a visual image could ever be understood without the discourse in which it was embedded. It was pointed out, though, that images should be viewed less as an accompaniment to a text but as arguments in their own right. This was emphasised by Kusukawa's example of Vesalius who had drawn a dog muscle into one of his illustrations of a human body in order to prove that Galen had been wrong in his animal-to-human analogy. The discussion reached a final agreement by stating that the meaning and function of images should generally be seen as the construction of an argument rather than a depiction of the true state or nature of the body.

Gender, History and the Representation of the Anatomical Body

In the final paper, **Roberta McGrath** (Napier University, Edinburgh) *We have never been modern* investigated the relationship between gender, anatomy and modernity. She argued that modern notions of the female body are the result of a long-term development which was crucial to the formation of a 'naturalised' female body. She located changing visual conceptions of the female body in anatomical illustrations of early modern obstetrics and traced a link to the development of our 'post-industrial reproductive biotechnology' in which the female body has become a mere object, detached from the foetus and human reproduction as such. Anatomical atlases in particular were active in producing this 'new body' by producing new (visual) knowledge of the womb, just as modern monitoring technologies increasingly bypass the mother's body during pregnancy. McGrath insisted that a visual representation should therefore never be taken at face value as historical evidence but as having a 'history in its own right'.

The starting point of the discussion was the assumed contradiction between McGrath's claim that women's bodies have virtually disappeared from today's obstetrics and the increasing public appearance of pregnant bodies as a fashionable phenomenon. Here, the difference between popular and medical discourse was pointed out, discerning one possible reason for the disappearance of the female body in obstetrics within the rising reductionism in medicine that tended to focus on and show images of the diseased parts rather than the body as a whole. McGrath additionally linked the reduction of women to their genitalia and/or visible signs of pregnancy in medicine to the general construction of gender difference in the modern and early modern production of images of the anatomical body. Stressing the importance of analysing the visual display of bodies in early modern anatomy eventually led the discussion to an over-all reflection of the workshop's themes.

The final discussion summarized the common thread of all papers: The main theme addressed the methodological issues related to investigating visual representations of the human body. It was argued that the relation between texts and images in particular and the specific historical context of visual images in general deserve more attention. An image created at a specific time always avails itself of preconceived ones; for instance can nineteenth-century obstetric illustrations be linked to those published by the surgeon-anatomist William Hunter in his obstetric atlas of 1774. Thus, the images

themselves should be understood as agents shaping experiences. Because of their ability to direct the eye of the beholder, they either changed or confirmed preconceived concepts and notions of the body.

Another outcome of the workshop was that greater attention should be given to the engagement of researchers and historians themselves in bringing together images, texts and objects. Historians were often in danger of investigating texts and images as single units, thus adding to the process of separating them and/or taking them out of their respective context. It was concluded that the history of the *making* of texts/images/objects equally deserves more attention, emphasising again the importance of historical and cultural contextualisation. The significance of interdisciplinarity for achieving a better understanding of the human body in its specific re-

lation to time and space was seen as vital for avoiding monocausal or partial explanations.

This was altogether an exciting and insightful workshop, raising many fascinating issues not only for medical historians. The subjects of the papers fostered lively discussions which, due to the various backgrounds of the participants, added fresh perspectives to the historical themes. Thus, the workshop certainly contributed to a better understanding of the human body in its historical and cultural context, and we hope to see each paper when published taking on board the fresh ideas and issues raised in the discussions. The organiser Sebastian Pranghofer, as well as the participants, must be thanked for an inspiring day at the CHMD in the Wolfson Research Institute, Stockton-on-Tees, UK.

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