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2014

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Performative Corpse:
Anatomy Theatres from the Medieval Era to the Virtual Age

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Drama and Theatre

by

Kristin Michelle Keating

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Anthony Kubiak, Chair
Professor Stephen Barker
Professor Emily Roxworthy
Professor Bryan Reynolds
Professor Lyle Massey

2014

DEDICATION

To

my mother

whose tireless determination in the face of life's obstacles

exemplifies the strength and endurance of the human body, spirit, and mind

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest and sincerest appreciation to my committee chair and advisor, Professor Anthony Kubiak, whose immense wisdom and expert guidance not only helped me fully envision this project, but also inspired me to expand my perspective on the world and push my ideas beyond their natural limits.

I would also like to humbly thank each of my committee members, Professor Stephen Barker, Professor Emily Roxworthy, Professor Bryan Reynolds, and Professor Lyle Massey for helping me bring this project to fruition with their sage advice and gracious dedication of time and energy.

I would like to thank my doctoral student colleagues and all of the faculty in the Drama and Theatre Departments at the University of California, Irvine and the University of California, San Diego who have given me the most supportive and inspiring community I could have asked for. I would also like to thank my MA advisor, Professor Patrick Tuite in the Drama Department at the Catholic University of America, and my mentor in life, Dr. Kathleen O'Connor, both of whom encouraged my pursuit of a doctoral degree.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my mother, Rosemarie Keating, and my brothers, Colin and Jason, as well as my close friends, without whose love, interest, and reassurance this dissertation would not have been possible. In particular, I would like to thank Tony Fracchia for the insights that helped spark this project and the endless support that gave me the strength to see it through, as well as the entire Fracchia family for their enthusiasm and encouragement.

I would like to thank The British Museum, The University of Glasgow Library, and The Institute for Plastination for permission to include their images in this dissertation. I would like to also express my appreciation to the University of California, Irvine Drama Department and the Claire Trevor School of the Arts for financial support in my doctoral studies and the University of California, Irvine Chancellor's Club for providing fellowship support for my dissertation.

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Anatomical Theatres, Body in Performance, Performance in Digital Culture

PUBLICATIONS

Keating, Kristin and Bryan Reynolds. "A World of (No) Wonder, or No Wonder-wounded Hearers Here: Toward Theory on the Vanishing Mediation of 'No Wonder' in Shakespeare's Theater." *Wonder in Shakespeare*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Performative Corpse:

Anatomy Theatres from the Medieval Era to the Virtual Age

By

Kristin Michelle Keating

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California, Irvine, 2014

Professor Anthony Kubiak, Chair

The Performative Corpse: Anatomy Theatres from the Medieval Era to the Virtual Age examines the various ways in which the human corpse has been displayed, dissected, and consumed by and for a public audience. To date, performative moments of human dissection have received little scholarly attention beyond work done on the anatomical theatres of the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in which criminal or unclaimed bodies were dissected for the edification of the academic community and the general public. Traditionally, the events of the anatomical theatre have been framed in Foucaudian terms: developing a hierarchical relationship of power between medico-judicial authority and the dissected body, which is objectified and commoditized. While this dissertation does not take issue with this line of analysis, it aims to open up other dimensions of the anatomy theatre by broadening its scope. It argues that, when placed in a privileged position on a theatrical stage, the dissected body becomes a “performative corpse.” In this theatrical space of transubstantiation, *confronting* death always turns into *constructing* death; in its dismemberment, the performative corpse reveals the

ways in which Western societies, in moments of ontological crisis, have fictionalized death to avoid its dreaded unknowability. This dissertation interrogates several historical moments of public, performative human dissection, including medieval displays of saintly relics and incorruptible bodies (Chapter 1), the sacrificial rites of the early modern anatomical theatres and their relationship to the drama of the period (Chapter 2), a seventeenth century farce condemning the growing lust of the era's anatomists (Chapter 3), nineteenth century monstrous bodies displayed and dissected to validate normal human bodies (Chapter 4), and, finally, twenty-first century exhibitions of plastinated corpses and the public autopsies of Gunther von Hagens (Chapter 5). This dissertation argues that an audience's encounter with the opened corpse always poses a particular threat to the integrity of both psychic and somatic boundaries—an aspect of the anatomical ritual that medico-scientific discourse seeks to repress. In these moments of social crisis, the anatomical theatre plays a critical role in conceptualizing, and immortalizing, the nature of death for a given community.

INTRODUCTION

In ancient Egypt, the ritual of embalmment always commenced with two distinct actions: first, incision; then, flight. The *parachistes*, or “slitters,” were charged with the task of cutting the flesh of a corpse so that it could be eviscerated and embalmed for mummification. Immediately after enacting the deed, the chosen slitter would flee from the scene. For, as Diodorus Siculus tells us, all those present would chase him down, “hurling stones and curses, as if diverting the defilement to his head; for they consider anyone odious who offers violence to the body of a fellow citizen or disfigures it or, in general, does it any harm.”¹ Although this stoning of the slitter was ritualistic in nature rather than truly punitive, it provides us with a striking (and performative) image of the great seriousness with which the Egyptians undertook the opening of the body, even when it was a standard component of the mummification process for nearly every member of the community. The ritual of the *parachistes* was a rite of purification; it transferred the locus of the body’s desecration to the still-living slitter so that the embalmers could carry out their far more extensive “violation” of the sacrosanct corpse absolved of guilt. In these two actions, we find the two directional movements that characterize our simultaneous attraction and aversion to the dead body—we are drawn into its interior, and yet, we retreat from what we find. Western funerary practices today carry the lingering resonances of this ancient ritual, allowing us too to confront the unknowability and profanity of death with at least attempted structure and reason.

The ritual of the *parachistes* also demonstrates a belief that is ubiquitous in many major cultural and religious traditions: namely, that the opening of the body unleashes some type of energetic force into the world, whether helpful or harmful; material, spiritual, affective, or moral.

¹ Diodorus 1.91 in Murphy 115.

For the medieval Christian, the opening and dismemberment of the corpse of a presumed saint could be a positive act: his or her material remains could be used to heal the corporeal ailments of the living. A sacred funerary ritual still practiced in some regions of Tibet, Qinghai, and Mongolia—*jhator*, or sky burial—which places the incised and dismembered body of the deceased on a mountaintop to be eaten by vultures reflects an analogous desire for the residual life force of the corpse to provide a type of sustenance for the living.

Much of the time, however, the opening and dismemberment of the body evokes feelings of unease, anxiety, revulsion, anger, or fear. As Julia Kristeva says, “the spasms and vomit” become our shield.² Human dissection was mostly prohibited in ancient Greek and Roman cultures because its defilement of the body threatened social order, largely because of the emotional and spiritual attachment the populace had to it.³ Modern-day exhibits of plastinated, preserved bodies have been interrupted on numerous occasions by protestors seeking to save these bodies from, or at least call attention to, their post-life humiliation, covering them with blankets, pouring red paint on the exhibition floor, even taking a hammer to the preserved corpses.⁴ Polite society, and much of academic discourse, often shies away from macabre discussions of bodily fluids, putrefying flesh, and dismembered and dissected bodies. For, as Kristeva writes, the corpse reminds us of “what [we] permanently thrust aside in order to live;” it is “death infecting life.”⁵ Therefore, modern Western taboos surrounding death are evident in the euphemisms we employ in its description, in the funerary practices that artificially restore lifelike appearance to a corpse, indeed in the clinicalization and sterilization of the dead body in general. This containment of death allows us to preserve our illusions.

² Kristeva 4.

³ French 1.

⁴ Goeller 272; Nunn 197.

⁵ Kristeva 4.

But direct confrontation with the dead body tells a less restrained story. The mourning of the death of a relative, friend, or other important figure is, of course, filled with emotion; it is tragic and painful. But when the dead body is examined from a medical or scientific perspective, it typically becomes categorized as “cadaver,” not “person.” The “dead of science are always strangers,” as Mary Roach puts it.⁶ Medical students are explicitly or implicitly taught techniques to distance themselves from the humanity of their subjects. The end results of this are evident in a long tradition of medical school iconography and photography that depict students and faculty posing in humorous tableaux with their cadavers.⁷ But even seasoned surgeons cannot always maintain their shields. We all have our own unique triggers that activate the human spirit in the dead. A Canadian surgeon, Marilena Marignani, notes that she doesn’t have a problem with dissecting heads, a task that is difficult for many of her colleagues. For her, it is the hands that are the hardest “because you’re holding this disconnected hand, and it’s holding you back.”⁸ As Marignani’s comments indicate, even in the clinical setting or the anatomical theatre, an encounter with the corpse is always an affective event, even if its impact is sometimes latent. Indeed, moments of public human dissection seem to have an uncanny ability to unleash deep-seated impulses in an audience, an ontological and sociological crisis that manifests itself in the bodies of all of its participants—sometimes devolving into violence, but always piercing the material and epistemological boundaries of a subject. The early modern anatomical theatres, in which executed criminals were dissected for the edification of the academic community and the interested public, strove to maintain solemnity in their proceedings by carefully imposing civic ceremony, but like the dramatic theatres of the time, they were waging a losing battle against the impropriety that always seemed to surround these events: prostitution, drinking, rioting, and in

⁶ Roach 12.

⁷ See Warner.

⁸ Roach 25.

the particular case of the anatomy lecture, grabbing or stealing organs from the body.⁹ Likewise, the Tyburn gallows in London became the focal point of numerous riots in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between the common people and the anatomists who came to claim the bodies for dissection, and mass pilgrimages to sites of saintly relics have been known to inspire panic in the crowds, sometimes resulting in injury and death.

Whereas such disorder might often be attributed to the psychology of crowds, I believe that these encounters with the opened corpse always pose a particular threat to the integrity of personal and social boundaries, and we can perhaps find that the violence, fear and anxiety unleashed in these moments of anatomical theatre emanate from the viscera of the anatomy itself—for the anatomical theatre is of the sacrificial order, and death is always a type of sacrifice.¹⁰ The *sparagmos*, the dismemberment, of the sacrificial object, both reveals the undercurrents of disorder within a community and unifies the population in its rejection or reintegration of its scapegoat. In moments of social crisis, as I will demonstrate, we see the anatomy theatre playing a critical role in conceptualizing life and death for a given community. In these moments, the corpse compels us to look.

This dissertation is about the communities who come together to see these bodies; a compulsion to peer into the abyss of death contained in the dissected corpse and beyond into the unknown. It investigates the ways in which the human corpse has been displayed, dissected, and consumed (both literally and metaphorically) by and for a public audience—from medieval displays of incorruptible saints to the rituals of the early modern anatomical theatres to twenty-first century preservations and virtualizations of the cadaver. Although the term “anatomical theatre” is typically used to refer specifically to the amphitheatres of medical instruction in the

⁹ See Ferrari 99; Sawday 66.

¹⁰ Lincoln 13.

fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, I am conceiving of anatomy theatre more broadly here to encapsulate the realm of the performance of human dissection. It is my belief that when placed in a privileged position on a theatrical stage, when burdened with the task of demonstrating cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, scientific or political “truths,” the dissected “actor” in the anatomy theatre has special powers to affect its audience. In other words, it becomes performative.

The “performative corpse” as I use it here, is a clinically dead body that is not autopsied only to determine a cause of death, although this may be part of the process, but that is ritually investigated with the intention of broader social and personal understanding. Because these moments of anatomy theatre always involve a body (the corpse) in the role of actor as well as an audience, they are always performative. But I also believe that the corpse in the anatomy theatre is performative in the same way that gender is performative in Judith Butler’s estimation—because its social performance in this context is a repeated act.¹¹ The performances of the anatomical theatre are pedagogical; they “[render] social laws explicit.”¹² In other words, at the crux of my argument is the understanding that the performative corpse’s reality lies entirely its fictional construct. While there is of course material substance to the dead body, like all theatrical objects, its meaning is intensified by the stage; its performance constructs, challenges, or undermines societal concepts of death. While some individuals might take issue with the lack of “liveness” in this theatrical subject, particularly as the ontology of “liveness” has been so rigorously debated in theatre studies as of late, it is my belief that when placed in the conceptual locus of the actor, the “dead” body attains a “life” that it otherwise does not. In addition, as I intend to demonstrate, common distinctions between life and death do not always stand up in these moments of anatomical theatre—a realization that, incidentally, might have the potential to

¹¹ Butler 397.

¹² Butler 397.

challenge some current notions of “liveness” once we realize that, in some respects, a dead body is just as capable of performing. However, what this project is primarily concerned with is the transformations that occur in our encounters with the performative corpse; the ways in which they alter our perspectives on death and redefine our notions of borders and interiority.

In his 1947 radio play, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*, Antonin Artaud fantasizes about the body pinned upon the autopsy table in the interest of a “dionysian castration” to use Foucault’s terms, a remaking of the living self.¹³ Artaud claims he has found a way to put an end to the age of the socially-constructed body, which is organized by authority against its free will. For him, this somewhat ironically also necessitates a forcible flaying and dissection of the subject in the interest of metaphysical transformation, not unlike the figures of Plato’s cave drawn kicking and screaming into the light. Artaud proclaims:

By placing him again, for the last time, on the autopsy table to remake his anatomy.

I say, to remake his anatomy.

Man is sick because he is badly constructed.

We must make up our minds to strip him bare in order to scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally,

god,
and with god
his organs.

For you can tie me up if you wish,
but there is nothing more useless than an organ.

When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions
and restored him to his true freedom.

They you will teach him again to dance wrong side out
as in the frenzy of dance halls
and this wrong side out will be his real place.¹⁴

¹³ Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* 54.

¹⁴ Artaud, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*.

Artaud's body, having died a social death, rises from the autopsy table, resurrected, reborn, transformed into the body without organs. The skin's identifiable boundary is inverted; the inside now touches the outside, exposed to the affective impact of the world. An encounter with the performative corpse, too, encourages us to confront, examine, and remake our own confidence in our somatic and psychical existence.

The classic children's board game Operation provides a useful visual model of this, as prosaic as it might initially seem, if we can momentarily ignore that the object of this game is a "live" surgical patient. (Assuredly, asking children to remove organs from a corpse would be too morbid for public taste.) The goal of the game is simple: players must use a pair of special tweezers to remove a variety of fictitious ailments—a broken heart, stomach butterflies, a brain freeze—from the various openings in "Cavity Sam" without touching the sides of the hollow they are excavating.¹⁵ The game of Operation depends on precisely the same distancing techniques that are found in other encounters with the dead body—humor, the genericization of the corpse, and commodification—which help to remove the human element from the procedure.¹⁶ Cavity Sam, his wide-open eyes uncharacteristic of one undergoing such a brutalizing procedure, is pinned upon the operating table, naked and vulnerable to the prods and pokes of greedy players, whose mission is intensified by the imaginary stakes that this is a real human body. The theme of Operation is successful precisely because of its phenomenological richness and its mimetic potential: A game that required players to pluck weeds out of a garden without harming the flowers would certainly not have the same appeal. The jarring sound of the

¹⁵ In the American version of the game, players are monetarily rewarded for each plastic ailment they remove. Strategy occasionally involves botching the first attempt of the operation in order for a larger pay-off later.

¹⁶ Humor and commercialism have long been used to achieve distance from the violation inherent in anatomization. John Warner's book *Dissection*, for example, presents a fascinating array of photographs of American students and their cadavers, often in humorous poses. And body snatchers and grave robbers were, of course, motivated by profit. A 1980s commercial for Operation presents a slapstick scene of a greedy doctor running from a patient holding a wad of cash and encourages the children playing the game to believe "You're the doctor! Collecting all your pay!"

buzzer that signals when a player accidentally touches the side of the patient's open wound resonates on our own bodies—anyone who has ever had a mere cut on his or her finger knows what this stab against an unprotected interior might feel like. Likewise, and on a far more profound level, we are fascinated with the opened body because we cannot help but feel it approaching from within our own bodies, our futures as corpse.

In this dissertation, I examine various other performative corpses pinned upon an autopsy table: medieval saints mined for their teeth and fingers, nineteenth century freak show exhibits dismembered and mummified for an afterlife of carnival and museum tours, a failed businessman who was dissected in an abandoned brewery in London's East End in 2002. Time and again, these moments of anatomical theatre reveal the tension between a profound compulsion to interact with an open body, to penetrate its interior and yet to avoid “touching its sides” as in the game of Operation. It examines what is required of us as observers to tolerate such displays and how we are transformed as a result of our foray into this liminal gulf bridging life and death.

In their illicitness and their allure, these performative corpses become necrophilic bodies. In using such a provocative term, I do not mean to suggest that there is always a material sexual attraction to the corpse involved, although there are certainly copious historical examples of this. Herodotus tells us that ancient Egyptian families sometimes held back the bodies of their female relatives for several days before turning them over to the embalmers for fear that they would be sexually violated.¹⁷ It was suspected that the body of the hirsute woman Julia Pastrana, discussed in Chapter 4, may also have been treated with sexual impropriety during her mummification process. There are numerous other examples of necrophilic behavior, particularly amongst those in professions interacting closely with the dead, and it is impossible to know all of what goes on behind the closed doors of funeral parlors and morgues. As disturbing and isolated as this

¹⁷ Herodotus 2.89.

behavior might seem, it is also true that exhibitions of the dissected human body that are directed towards a broader, mainstream public audience are often described as “erotic” or “pornographic.” The plastinated exhibits of Body Worlds, for example, have been decried as a pornographic revelry in “anatomical nudity.”¹⁸ In *The Anatomist*, the late seventeenth century play discussed in Chapter 3, the female characters appear to be under sexual threat whenever they enter the doctor’s dissection room, a space that seems to only to enhance the lust of the men within it. Michael Sappol calls this the “homosocial meaning of anatomical mayhem,” the creation of a camaraderie and a sense of prowess achieved through sexualized behavior around a dead body.¹⁹ And, as discussed in Chapter 4, the subjection of nonwhite corpses often tend towards the necro-pornographic, as in the case of Saartjie Baartman, whose genitals were excised, preserved, and displayed for years after her death.

Conceptually, the necrophilic body is important because it illustrates a particular type of desire for the corpse. While the pronouncement of the necrophilic in encounters with the performative corpse might vary in scale, the implied impropriety and transgression in a relationship with the cadaver necessarily eroticizes it, connects it with the necrophilic urge because its illicit aesthetics foregrounds a “disruptive pleasure.”²⁰ And just as the necrophiliac is driven by a desire for total control over the body of another, the necrophilic gaze in the anatomical theatre is occupied with the impossible balance between desiring both complete control and yet requiring a semblance of autonomy in its object. The necrophilic gaze is thwarted by its own ambitions, for it must never fully attain the control it seeks or it would spoil the event at hand. In other words, the necrophilic gaze requires just enough life in its object for it to be “real,” but just enough death to render it an object of the utmost submission. The necrophilic

¹⁸ Campbell 314; Linke.

¹⁹ Park, *Secrets of Women* 218.

²⁰ Campbell 317.

body, therefore, resides in the gulf between presence and absence alongside its compatriots: the abject, the grotesque, the liminal.

Completely essential to the erotic overtones and theatricality of the anatomical theatre is its overwhelmingly sensory nature. The theatre (the *theatron* or “seeing place”) is often seen as being dominated by the visual. But there are also certain smells and sounds that are completely unique to, and unavoidable in, the dissection process—for instance, the proverbial “stench of death” or its inverse, the “odor of sanctity” of incorrupt saintly bodies. The sensory organ of taste is highlighted in surrounding acts of necrophagia, such as in the corpse medicine gleaned from executed cadavers and used widely in Europe from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries. Taste also occasionally becomes a mode of scientific inquiry in the anatomical theatre: Valsalva, an eighteenth century surgeon, notably, was said to have tasted bodily fluids from his subjects in order to learn about their ailments.²¹ Francis Barker, like myself, sees these early anatomical theatres as sacrificial banquets, epitomized in the commemorative dinner that would follow the dissection: “To execute, to dismember, to eat.”²² Finally, touch is a sensory engagement worthy of particular note in the anatomy theatre. As in the biblical example of doubting Thomas, seeing is never fully believing in the anatomy; the penetration of wounds with one’s own fingers is the primary means to truth, as is often illustrated in iconography of anatomists touching the insides of their subjects [See Figures 1, 7 and 11]. Early modern anatomists would also sometimes appeal to the desirous fingers of their spectators by passing around organs amongst them, a tradition carried on by Gunther von Hagens in his twenty-first century autopsies performed for a live studio audience.²³

²¹ D. Freedman.

²² Barker 73.

²³ Bouchard 93.

The “corpse power” of the performative cadaver within this sensory milieu, meaning its ability to transform bodies, both alive and dead, is at the core of this project. The theatre space has long been considered a site in which we watch a microcosm of humanity played out before us. It is the classic space of the dissolution of human boundaries. In watching a dissection, we become “as if” the anatomist, “as if” the corpse.²⁴ In the anatomy theatre—the realization of the anatomical dreams of Artaud—we find an alchemical space that presents the greatest possibility for transcendence of prior notions about the body.²⁵ Here the material corpse is transmuted into new forms, as the chapters in this dissertation will demonstrate—into religious ideal, sacrificial scapegoat, psychoanalytical object, abject monster, posthuman icon.

Thus, my central argument is that, in this space of transubstantiation, *confronting* death always turns into *constructing* death. Death itself becomes performative; a dance at the outer borders of life. As Belgian philosopher Raoul Vaneigem muses, “we do not die because we must, we die because it is a habit to which one day, not so long ago, our thoughts became bound.”²⁶ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the anatomy theatre. Like the death masks used by ancient cultures to cover the face of a corpse with its living image, or more recently created wax or plaster simulacra of eminent lives, death is contrived out of a fictionalized attachment to the living body that becomes authenticated by imagination.

It is my hope that this project opens up new theorizations on the nature of the anatomical theatre that has already been much discussed from a historical perspective.²⁷ In particular, the works of Jonathan Sawday, Andreas Carlino, Giovanni Ferrari, Kate Cregan, Katharine Park, Cynthia Klestinec, and Helen MacDonald provide valuable context on the anatomical theatres

²⁴ Just as Phelan has argued that the “as if” is animated by theatre, helping to construct our conceptions of interiority (*Unmarked* 167).

²⁵ Phelan, *Unmarked* 167.

²⁶ Qtd. in Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 144.

²⁷ See Sawday, Carlino, Linebaugh, Richardson, Ferrari, Nunn.

and spectacles of execution and public dissection from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Jonathan Sawday's influential book, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, is particularly important in establishing a relationship of power between anatomical authority and the corpse, which was colonized just as European explorers took possession of the New World. Sawday, Hillary Nunn, Matthew Landers, and David Hillman compellingly argue for a ubiquitous "culture of dissection" that captivated the Renaissance imagination and is echoed in the drama, poetry and literature of the time period. Andreas Carlino and Giovanna Ferrari, as well, are excellent sources on the development of the anatomical theatre and its relation to Carnival celebrations, which have been particularly valuable to my investigation into the performative nature of these spectacles. Ruth Richardson's *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* and Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged* provide compelling accounts of how public execution and dissection, from the seventeenth century on, became a particularly dire threat to marginalized individuals in England, and Europe at large. As these scholars argue, the degree to which dissection was seen as violating the body was eased by the employment of bodies that were determined to be less than human: the criminal, poor, mentally ill, deformed, or nonwhite. Most of these existing accounts on the anatomical theatre take a Foucauldian approach in their analysis: developing a hierarchical relationship of power between medico-judicial authority and the dissected body. The possession of the body becomes the central aim of the state apparatus, and the anatomist, sanctioned by legal, judicial and medical authority, functions as an agent of the state. As an anatomical object, the corpse in the anatomical theatre was rendered less than human, commoditized and objectified.

It also seems apparent from existing scholarly work that Cartesian analysis has lived on in medico-scientific discourse, particularly as it pertains to the dissection or autopsy of the dead

body. Sawday, in fact, argues that the anatomical body in the Early Modern period was actually essential in the development of Cartesian subjectivity itself. In other words, the mapping of the body's interior, and the resulting demystification of the "machine," facilitated the emergence of the operative "ghost." Indeed, I have found that much of the commentary and response to the anatomy theatre, past and present, is tied to this line of thought as well. While I do not disagree with the fact that the anatomical theatres played a significant role in social subjugation of certain bodies, this project intends to show that there is more to be discovered in interrogating the other "possessive" relationships of the anatomical stage, particularly the *audience's* desire to possess and consume the body.

The human body, of course, occupies a central role in scholarship in the humanities in a variety of fields, but it is particularly relevant in theatre and performance studies, in which the body is seen as the primary communicative instrument. While the elements of performance in the anatomy lecture are often addressed in discussions of theatres of anatomy, this dissertation aims to provide a greater attention to the intricate nuances of dissective performance than is currently available in published work. A few works, such as Kate Cregan's *The Theatre of the Body: Staging Death and Embodying Life in Early-Modern London*, Hillary Nunn's *Staging Anatomies: Dissection and Spectacle in Early Stuart Tragedy*, and Christine Quigley's *Dissection on Display* do indeed concentrate specifically on the performative aspects of anatomical theatres. The collection *Anatomy Live: Performance and the Operating Theatre* also addresses more contemporary relationships between anatomy, performativity, and the body, particularly as they are manifested in performance art, the Visible Human Project and the Body Worlds exhibits. Many of the authors in this volume strive to recoup the body from its former role as a mute object of analysis upon the stage and reposition it as an active agent of world-

making and the production of thought.²⁸ My arguments here are highly influenced by this renegotiated position. The works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Serres, Brian Massumi, Ann Weinstone, David Leder, and Linda Holler have also been particularly influential in helping me to rethink the significance of bodily sensations, touch, and affect as they pertain to anatomy theatre.

Each of the chapters in this project examines a different historical and cultural moment of “crisis” in theatres of anatomy. In drawing from multiple time periods and spaces, it is not my intention to imply that there is an overarching ontology that guides the treatment of the anatomized corpse in every culture. Every society, every individual has a different relationship to the corpse and to death. To generalize all moments of anatomy theatre, just as it would be to generalize all cultures, is, of course, inherently problematic. Nevertheless, what I am interested in examining here are the threads of human impulse, the common urges to discovery, that seem to motivate these different theatres and to identify the characteristics of the performative corpse that seem to drive its existence on these stages.

Rather than beginning where most scholarly works on anatomical theatre commence—that is, with the early modern anatomical theatres—Chapter 1 addresses the presentations of saintly relics and incorrupt bodies in the medieval period. In a medieval Christian society, if a body did not decay as expected after death, it was seen as a sign of the sanctity of the individual, and the corpse would often be displayed wholly or in part for public veneration, a tradition that is carried on today in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Because such displays were so important to medieval cults of saints, many of these bodies were, in fact, covertly embalmed or otherwise displayed in a deceptive manner. While these practices became a major target of the

²⁸ This is also an impulse explored by many twentieth and twenty-first century performance artists—for example, Glen Tetley in *De Anatomische Les* who lays upon the dissection table in the style of Rembrandt’s *Anatomy of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* before reviving himself and beginning to dance (*Anatomy Live* 111).

Protestant Reformation, which criticized the Church for profiting from the naivety of its believers, I argue that these preservations, deceptive or otherwise, were also driven by a need to develop an alternative to “normal” death and decay. The “incorrupt” body thus was established as an emulative, and achievable, ideal in opposition to the “corrupt” body, the body that decayed naturally. Consequently, these presentations of relics and incorrupt bodies helped institute a modern Western trajectory of performative death that seeks to mask its disturbing unknowability.

Chapter 2 then moves on to the early modern anatomical theatres, framed with an understanding of the spiritual and sacrificial resonances the corpse also carried with it into this era. In anatomical theatres such as the *Theatrum Anatomicum* at Leiden University, the Anatomical Theatre of the Archiginnasio in Bologna, and the Anatomical Theatre of the Barber-Surgeons Company in London, curious onlookers crowded in tiered amphitheatres to peer into the unknown void of the opened criminal. As noted already, the proceedings of the early modern anatomical theatres are often described as extensions of the executed criminal’s punishment, as well as a civic ritual that solidified medical and judicial authority. But what is often not emphasized in scholarly discussions of these theatres are the various somatic connections fused between audiences and the body, particularly the use of the dissected body as “mummy,” or corpse medicine. This chapter, thus, uses the relationships forged between the early modern dramatic theatres and the anatomical theatres to reframe the anatomy lecture as a more fully embodied, fully sensory sacrificial and communal rite.

Chapter 3 analyzes one of the only widely-produced plays to take human dissection as its central theme: a late seventeenth century farce by Edward Ravenscroft entitled *The Anatomist*. The humor in this play derives from the servants who convince individuals, on two separate occasions, to pretend to be a corpse destined for dissection, allowing the audience to relish in

watching them squirm upon the dissection table while the tools are being readied by the dissector. In doing so, *The Anatomist* both presents a stringent critique of the insatiable lust of the anatomists in this time period and also reveals contemporary anxieties about the biological and psychological signifiers of life and death, provoked by popular stories of the time concerning premature dissections and burials.

Chapter 4 attends to the dissections and public exhibitions of bodies classified as “freaks” in the nineteenth century, specifically Joice Heth, displayed by P.T. Barnum as the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington; Saartjie Baartman, “The Hottentot Venus” who captivated audiences with her large posterior and rumored extraordinary genitals; and Julia Pastrana, a woman born with rare genetic abnormalities who was advertised as a Darwinian “missing link.” This chapter examines how issues of race and gender influenced the presentation of these women’s bodies in both life and death and how their deaths were crafted and recrafted by various groups in support of their scientific, political, and social agendas. Rendered monstrous, these women had their “corpse power” subverted, allowing their bodies to be coopted in the interest of myths defining the human and the inhuman.

Chapter 5, finally, analyzes twentieth and twenty-first century exhibitions of preserved corpses and the televised human dissections performed by Gunther von Hagens, the founder of the original exhibit of plastinated corpses, *Body Worlds*, in the first decade of the twenty-first century. These exhibits and public autopsies proclaim to authentically represent the human body, but this chapter argues that this authenticity is ultimately derived from the intense theatricality of these proceedings. But in addition to examining how these presentations reify a particular humanist ontology, this chapter also argues that the theoretical concept of the

posthuman that emerges in these presentations ultimately undermines the proceedings and presents a threat to the audience's sense of interiority and embodiment.

This project concludes with a brief musing on two potential future trajectories for conceptualizations of public human dissection and the performative corpse, one in which the corporeal body is deemed to be integral to personal and social understanding and one that finds the future of human anatomy in the virtual, not the material. The first alternative I see as being epitomized in the crucifixion experiments conducted by Pierre Barbet, Frederick Zugibe, and Gunther von Hagens, who have used both corpses and live human beings to investigate the nature of the death of Christ. The other alternative is symbolized by the digitization of the human body in the Visible Human Project, which seems to imply that a material body is no longer needed to understand human physiology. Both of these trajectories, however, craft human beings as Heideggerian “standing reserve.”²⁹ And this is an understanding of the human body that I hope my dissertation will demonstrate has been a long time coming—from the anatomies of Vesalius to the plastinates of von Hagens.

Ultimately, I hope that this project will show that there is more to be learned from the body in moments of public dissection than anatomical understanding. The performative corpse presents evidence of human existence and all that we hold sacred about our material and ephemeral presences. Indeed, in manifesting presence, the performance of the corpse anatomizes existence. Whereas medico-scientific discourse tends to repress the affective aspects of death,³⁰ there are always moments in the anatomy when the life of the corpse is physiologically and psychically triggered, when the hand of a corpse seems to hold you back. I believe that what is

²⁹ Heidegger 27.

³⁰ Waldby 141.

learned from the dissected body in a medico-scientific perspective is both limited and limiting.³¹ Thus, this dissertation examines what is not controlled for, in the scientific sense, in these moments; the moments of fluidity, escape, subversion. This necessitates a recovery of a sacred trajectory of performance and ritual that still very much influences our interaction with the body. For once we enter this performative realm, as Mircea Eliade argues of the sacred, bodily actions are never simply physiological; they “[are] or can become, a sacrament, that is, a communion with the sacred.”³²

³¹ Dwight Conquergood has also argued that “the dominant way of knowing in the academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective: ‘knowing that,’ and ‘knowing about.’ This is a view from above the object of inquiry: knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print. This propositional knowledge is shadowed by another way of knowing that is grounded in active intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: ‘knowing how,’ and ‘knowing who.’ This is a view from the ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community, but is ephemeral” (146).

³² Eliade 14.



Figure 1: *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* by Rembrandt (1631).

CHAPTER 1

The Incorrupt and the Corrupt: Consecrating the Performative Corpse

“Vanity of vanities, All is vanity!” –KJV, Ecclesiastes 1:2

Judging from almost the entirety of human history—spanning cultural, spiritual, chronological, or geographical distinctions—this biblical caution might very well be one of the most profoundly ignored warnings of all time. In this passage, Ecclesiastes admonishes us not to look for meaning in our individual efforts, for doing so is futile.¹ Just like our corporeal bodies, our time upon the earth too will turn to dust.² And yet, we persist. For to be human is to seek remembrance; to find meaning in our time upon the earth, both diachronically and synchronically, individually and communally. Without purpose, we flounder. In Western philosophy, purpose is often determined psychically; Descartes famously derived evidence of his existence and meaning in this way.³ But in addition to our contemplative yearnings for meaning, the subconscious urges of our bodies also fight for existence. We feel experience within our bones; we find memory etched in the scars and wrinkles on the skin. So perhaps Ecclesiastes should not be so hard on us, for we experience the world from within a *body*, and thus it is only natural that we should seek its preservation despite very well knowing that it might be vain folly. Our skin may dissolve, our organs decompose, our bones crumble to dust, yet the protection and appearance of our bodies, even after death, matter very much to us. Vanity prevails.

And so it was for Europeans in the medieval period, whose daily confrontations with death—whether in the putrefying flesh hanging from the gibbets, the blackened limbs of plague

¹ Vanity, in the biblical sense, signified futility; it did not connote obsession with one’s own appearance as it does today, although it is easy to see how our current employment of the term derives from its original meaning.

² “All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (KJV, Ecclesiastes 3:20).

³ See Descartes, *Descartes’ Meditations*, SM.

victims carted through the streets, or other bodies succumbed to any number of diseases, illnesses, malnourishments, or violence—have been widely credited as the source of the age’s obsession with *memento mori* images [See Figures 2 and 3]. These images were presumably designed to remind individuals that their earthly existence is transient, but the state of the soul is eternal. The senses should therefore be directed inward towards nourishing the spirit rather than feeding the lustful and gluttonous material urges of the body.

Given Christianity’s insistence on denouncing the body and its desires as corporeal evidence of original sin, it may seem contradictory that medieval Christians also devoted such close attention to the preservation and reverence of the bodies of their saints and martyrs. However, medieval Christians also believed that their bodies would be resurrected at the Last Judgment: “And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God,” prophesizes the Book of Job.⁴ Therefore, the bodies of those who had lived holy existences were ardently searched after their deaths for corporeal signs that they had entered God’s kingdom and performative rituals were enacted regularly to remind the faithful of the still-living power of these dead bodies.

But the importance of *presence* of and within the corporeal body in medieval Christian belief is balanced with the significance of the body’s *absence* in the faith. In what is often cited by theatre historians as the origin of modern Western theatre, the tenth century *Quem quaeritis* liturgical trope presents a reenactment of the journey of the “three Marys” to the tomb to anoint Christ’s body. But when they arrive, they are instead confronted by its absence. When the visitors tell the angel they find there that they are looking for Jesus, they are told, “He is not here; he is risen, just as he foretold.”⁵ In the Gospel of Luke, the angel’s command is slightly

⁴ C. Freedman 18, 139; KJV, Job 19:26.

⁵ The full *Quem quaeritis* trope reads:

different; but in some ways, it is even more revelatory of the driving forces behind medieval preoccupation with pilgrimages and the veneration of holy corpses. “Why seek you the dead amongst the living?” the angel in the Gospel inquires.⁶ Yet, this is precisely what millions of Christian pilgrims have done over the past two millennia. The medieval Christians who watched this Easter trope in a church or cathedral would also have been surrounded by the bodily reminders and relics of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Early churches conducted the Eucharist on the coffins of martyrs, and every church was required to host the relics of at least one saint in order to be consecrated.⁷ Outside the church doors, pilgrims flocked in droves to the Holy Land, Constantinople, Rome, and later cities such as Canterbury and Santiago de Compostela, seeking the bodies of saints and anything their flesh had ever touched.⁸ Thus, the medieval period was also the golden age of journeys to be in the presence of corpses that promised eternal life. Mementos of Christ and the saints served not only as tangible focal points of prayer and meditation, but also as healing springs of otherworldly grace and sustenance. When a body was discovered to be wholly “incorrupt,” seemingly unaffected by the usual devastating processes of decay, it was a particular cause for jubilation and wonder: this was deemed a

Angel: Whom do ye seek in the sepulchre, O followers of Christ?

Marys: Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, just as he foretold.

Angel: He is not here; he is risen, just as he foretold. Go, announce that he is risen from the sepulchre. (Gassner 35)

The *Quem quaertius* began as a call and response between two choruses, but eventually evolved into a short liturgical “play.” The “stage directions” for the trope from the tenth century *Regularis Concordia* read: “While the third lesson is being read, four of the brethren shall vest, one of whom, wearing an alb as though for some different purpose, shall enter and go stealthily to the place of the ‘sepulchre’ and sit there quietly, holding a palm in hand. Then, while the third respond [sic] is being sung, the other three brethren, vested in copes and holding thuribles in their hands, shall enter in their turn and go to the place of the ‘sepulchre,’ step by step, as though searching for something. Now these things are done in imitation of an angel seated on the tomb and of the women coming with perfumes to anoint the body of Jesus” (Qtd. in Kobialka 10).

⁶ KJV, Luke 24:5.

⁷ A tradition that continues to this day in the Catholic Church (Craughwell xvi).

⁸ Relics in the Catholic Church are divided into three classes: a first class relic is the physical remains of a saint’s body, such as bones, hair, or blood; a second class relic is a personal possession of a saint, such as clothing, letters, or furniture; and a third class relic is an object, such as a cross or shroud, that is touched to a first class relic (Craughwell xii).

miraculous sign that the individual had been accepted into heaven and could serve as an intercessor to God.⁹ Incorruptibility provided a type of encore for the corporeal body. It provided hope that vanity, in the sense of earthly futility, could be conquered, and that vanity, in the sense of attention to physical appearance, might indeed have some spiritual merit.

But as I will demonstrate, at the same time, the saintly relic—in particular the incorrupt body—also participated in a process of theatrically masking the true nature of death, perhaps helping to institute a cosmic shift in Western interpretation of death. So urgent and anxious was the need to justify the following of a holy person in life with evidence of their sainthood in death that the bodies of Christian leaders were often covertly embalmed or otherwise deceptively presented, with gilded casings and wax coverings masking their “flaws” of decay. For medieval Christianity had arguably become dependent on this division between the saintly body and the “profane” body, between what I will term the *incorrupt* and the *corrupt* body. The incorrupt body, by evading the normal laws of decay, became the model for living Christians to emulate, thus rendering the natural decay of the decomposing corpse an *unnatural* and undesirable fate. It presented, in a very material way, the relationship between the purified body and virtue, and, consequently, the isomorphic relationship between a corrupt body and sin. Thus, in addition to the seedlings of a Western dramatic tradition, medieval Christianity also planted the roots of the performative corpse, one that was constructed out of faith rather than material substance.

The preserved human body—whether it is done so naturally, artificially, or miraculously—challenges the corpse and, consequently, death itself. In *Christian Mummification: An Interpretive History of the Preservation of Saints, Martyrs and Others*, Ken Jeremiah provides an arresting description of death and decay as it is supposed to happen:

⁹ C. Freedman 13.

Within hours after death, a body becomes cold and begins to dry out. It also changes color and stiffens while autolysis, the breakdown of bodily tissues by enzymes, begins to run its course. As if this were not enough to destroy the deceased, bodily acids also seep out and begin to devour the flesh from within. Then putrefaction sets in and the body rots, giving off a horrible stench. The body swells, eyeballs turn to liquid, blisters form and burst, and the upper layer of the skin slides away with light contact. The skin turns various stages of green and then darkens, eventually turning black. The body, possibly beautiful during life, transforms into something that many would consider hideous and revolting.¹⁰

Death invades the corporeal body from both without and within, and the biological processes that have evolved throughout millions of years to return dust to dust override any life-sustaining vital urges that once drove the living body. It is a fate humans in nearly every culture have attempted to prevent or suspend to some degree through artificial preservation techniques, sometimes developed from the observation of bodies that have been preserved by nature. Natural preservation of the human body is facilitated by extreme climatic conditions such as cold or dryness or through burial in locations that inhibit bacterial growth. The bodies of Incan children, intoxicated with maize beer and left to freeze on mountaintops as part of a sacrificial ritual, for example, have recently been discovered to be remarkably preserved, even after several hundred years.¹¹ In the region of Ireland, Scotland, and Denmark, “bog bodies” as old as 5,500 years have been extracted from marshes that appear to have been preserved by the humic and tannic acid in the peat, which impedes the bacterial growth that eats away the flesh. Another rare phenomenon, adipocere, has also been known to create the appearance of a preserved body, although in this case the fat in the body is not preserved but transformed into a waxy material that creates a permanent cast of the body, often resulting in a ghastly, bloated appearance.¹²

Many scholars believe that the ancient Egyptians developed their sophisticated art of mummification from discovering bodies that had been naturally preserved in the hot, dry desert

¹⁰ Jeremiah 3.

¹¹ Jeremiah 13.

¹² Cruz 32.

sands.¹³ In Egypt, artificial preservation of bodies became important because it was believed that it would maintain the identity of the deceased in the other world. Wealthier classes of citizens were embalmed using the most well-known technique, including the removal of the brain through the nasal passages and the evisceration of internal organs with the exception of the heart and kidneys.¹⁴ The body was then filled with hot resin, spices, or resin-soaked sawdust and placed in natron, a sodium carbonate that dried the body. After up to seventy days of desiccation, the body was cleansed with spices and oils, meticulously wrapped in cotton and linen, adorned with jewels and amulets for the protection of the spirit on its dangerous journey, and stored in a mummy case. Less affluent bodies simply had their intestines roughly removed before being desiccated in natron.¹⁵ Ken Jeremiah argues that the mummification traditions of Egypt are particularly significant to Christianity because of the ways in which they influenced the intentions of Christian preservation of the body: if part of the soul remained with the body in death, as was believed in the Egyptian tradition (and in some Japanese and Chinese traditions), then preservation in early Christianity might also have been used to help perpetuate the existence of the individual into the afterlife. Jeremiah also notes that the ancient Egyptians believed that the spirit of the deceased remained entirely with the physical body for forty days, a concept also

¹³ Cowie and Johnson 13. Egypt has long been credited with developing the art of mummification, but Chinchorro mummies eviscerated and packed with vegetable fibers or animal hair have been found in Chile and Peru dating to 5000 BC, two thousand years before the oldest Egyptian mummies (Jeremiah 17).

¹⁴ The heart was likely left to be weighed by Anubis in the afterlife. The reason the kidneys were left in the body is a matter of debate, but possibly they were too difficult to remove or simply considered to be insignificant (Cruz 28).

¹⁵ This instinct towards preservation is found not only in a Western Christian tradition. In Tibet, mummification was also used to preserve the bodies of high lamas. The internal organs were removed and the abdominal cavity packed with lacquer-soaked padding and wrapped in lacquered silk. The body was then coaxed into a lotus position and dried in a heated salt-filled room. After it was cooled and unwrapped, the lama's body was covered in gold leaf by skilled craftsmen and seated on a throne in the Hall of Incarnations with other gilded lamas. Secular society has also desired the preservation of its important figures. Alexander the Great was reputedly preserved in honey and Stalin and Lenin were both embalmed and displayed. Other unique strategies have been employed to preserve bodies as well. In 1492, the body of Sir Gerard de Braybroke was preserved in a mysterious, aromatic fluid, which, according to one brave observer who ventured to indulge in it, tasted like mushroom catchup infused with Spanish olives. An eighteenth century naval commander was found steeped in rum, as "befitted one of his calling" (Cruz 28-29).

found in Jesus's story in the Gospels, with his ascension taking place forty days after his resurrection.¹⁶

Indeed, Christianity does have its own long history of ritualistic, artificial preservation beginning with its roots in Judaism. In the Old Testament, Joseph commands his servants to embalm the body of his father so that it can be publically mourned for forty days, and the New Testament relates how the body of Christ was anointed with natural preservatives made of plants and wrapped in spices.¹⁷ Early Christians were determined to follow the example of Christ, and so they too began anointing bodies with natural preservatives and wrapping them in linen, actions that greatly aided the preservation of many early saints and martyrs.¹⁸ In the medieval period, wax was occasionally used to cover the faces and hands of holy bodies to preserve them and mask the unsightliness of death and decay.¹⁹ Consciously-employed preservation rituals have continued into the present day. In 1984, for example, the Vatican reportedly preserved the body of Ukrainian cardinal Josef Slipyj, a potential candidate for canonization, for political reasons: Slipyj's material body could be strategically displayed by the Church to maintain a physical presence in Ukraine, a country that the Vatican worried at the time was susceptible to other religious influences as Communist control faded.²⁰ It is also standard procedure in the Catholic Church to at least partially embalm the bodies of all popes in order to preserve them for public viewing, similar to how monarchs were preserved to endure the lengthy wait for state funerals

¹⁶ Jeremiah 25.

¹⁷ "And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father: and the physicians embalmed Israel. And forty days were fulfilled for him; for so are fulfilled the days of those which are embalmed: and the Egyptians mourned for him threescore and ten days" (KJV, Genesis 50:2-3); "And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury" (KJV, John 19:39-40).

¹⁸ Pringle 259.

¹⁹ In Italy, bodies were sometimes buried in volcanic soil without a casket to desiccate the remains, and in other cases, such as those of St. Clare of Montefalco, Blessed Margaret of Metola, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Bernardine of Siena, and St. Rita of Cascia, the bodies of holy figures were thoroughly eviscerated and embalmed (Jeremiah 10).

²⁰ Pringle 252-53.

without entirely repulsing those who came to pay their respects.²¹ It is important to note precisely how interrelated the instincts towards preservation and performance are here. Although embalming and preservation of a dead body is often a private matter, when it is employed for important figures, as these examples illustrate, it almost always became a public one—implicated in a process that prepares the body to perform for the masses “how it is” with the holy corpse, imbuing it with a distinctly theatricalized, self-conscious aura that shaped the body as it shaped the beliefs of the populace.

If preserved corpses were the bound performers of this theatrical afterlife, it was the Incorruptibles who were the mystical, transcendent stars of this stage. These bodies, defying all explanation, form a third categorization of preserved bodies beyond the naturally and the intentionally preserved.. Unlike other preserved bodies, these bodies remain moist and flexible and sometimes bleed, sweat, or exude other mysterious substances for years after death.²² In some instances, as Joan Carroll Cruz notes in her 1977 book on the Incorruptibles,²³ as the Catholic Church calls them, even when specific measures have been taken to destroy a corpse with lime or other means—as was the case with St. Francis Xavier, St. John of the Cross, and St. Pascal Baylon—these bodies still defy decay.²⁴ Mysteriously preserved bodies, however, don’t appear only in Christianity. In 1955 and 1973, twenty-two and fifty years after his death respectively, the body of Buddhist lama, Dashi-Dorzho Itigilov, was exhumed and discovered to be soft and incredibly resistant to physical decay. In 2002, Itigilov’s body was examined by pathologists and was determined to be in the same condition as someone who had been buried

²¹ Craughwell xvi-xvii.

²² Cruz 31.

²³ *The Incorruptibles* by Cruz, a devout Catholic, is one of the only works in English devoted exclusively to these mysterious bodies.

²⁴ Cruz 34.

only 36 hours prior, despite the fact that it exhibited no sign of artificial preservation.²⁵ On occasion, other bodies that bear no particular religious or cultural significance have been disinterred and also found to be in a naturally preserved state.²⁶ In recent years, some graveyards in Germany and Austria, for example, have struggled to find space for new corpses as large numbers of bodies buried there are inexplicably refusing to decay.²⁷

Modern-day skeptics have presented numerous theories for these purportedly miraculous preservations. Some hypothesize that certain burial conditions might be responsible; for example, heavy clay soil might form a vacuum around a casket, protecting the corpse from water and bacteria.²⁸ Others point to the cool temperatures of catacombs or the triple casketing that is standard procedure for figures such as popes that might seal out air and bacteria.²⁹ Radiation has also been suggested as a culprit.³⁰ In recent decades, more and more bodies that were once considered to be incorrupt have since been found to be artificially embalmed, a practice that scholars have recently discovered was more widely employed in early Christianity than previously believed.³¹ Others have suggested that the ascetic lifestyle of some monks and nuns might have contributed to their delayed decay.³² Because it is so difficult to determine when natural or artificial intervention may have played a role and because it is a phenomena clearly not limited to Catholic saints, the Catholic Church no longer accepts incorruptibility as one of the two requisite miracles for canonization. Nevertheless, scientific answers have yet to be found

²⁵ Jeremiah 23.

²⁶ For example, Heather Pringle describes an interview with Roger Weber, the manager of an exhumation company in England, who showed her pictures of a middle-aged Victorian woman who had died in 1839 and had been recently exhumed almost completely intact (243-5).

²⁷ The cause for the slow decaying bodies in these cemeteries is uncertain. Some have speculated that the preservatives in modern foods are helping to preserve corpses, others claim that bacteria in the soil is being wiped out by pollution or pesticides or that rising metals in the soil may be inhibiting decomposition (Leidig).

²⁸ Pringle 246.

²⁹ Pringle 263-65.

³⁰ Cruz 32.

³¹ For example, in the 1980s, pathologist Ezio Fulcheri examined St. Margaret of Cortona, once considered to be an Incorruptible, and found that she had been artificially embalmed (Pringle 254-64).

³² Cruz 41.

for all of the mysteriously preserved bodies of the world, and therefore they retain a certain mysterious aura, fascinating exceptions to the natural laws that generally circumscribe our bodies. For example, the incorruptible body of St. Zita was examined by pathologist Gino Fornaciari in the 1980s, but it revealed no sign of human intervention through evisceration or preservatives [See Figure 4]. Several other figures considered to be holy, including St. Ubald of Gubbio, Blessed Jacinta of Fatima, and the Venerable Father Solanus Casey, to this day also appear to have eluded decay by mysterious forces.³³

To fully realize the significance of the incorrupt body, or parts from a saint's body (bones, teeth, fingers, and so on) that are metonymically substituted for the whole corpse,³⁴ it is important to understand that early and medieval Christians conceived of the body in a way that is largely incomprehensible to contemporary American and European societies. In a time before Cartesian thought imposed a "dogmatic idea of being" on the body, to use Merleau-Ponty's terms, objective categories of bodily presence and absence were not nearly as defined.³⁵ Christ's own resurrection had shown that a dead body could, in fact, overcome death and reappear in a living state, and this cast doubt on whether there was an absolute distinction between life and death, at least for the holy.³⁶ In opposition to emerging doctrine that despised the body, this belief in the transfigured body created hope for corporeality.³⁷ Incorruptibility, most of all, was seen as evidence of God's grace bestowed upon the body in anticipation of its eternal life; evidence of a bodily union with Christ.³⁸ Many early and medieval Christians, particularly the rural peasantry, incorporated their pre-Christian "pagan" beliefs into their religion. In fact, the

³³ Pringle 262; Quigley, *Modern Mummies* 196.

³⁴ In medieval Christianity, we see fragments of the saintly body being considered to have just as much significance as the whole body. The incorrupt body was wondrous, but dividing and dispersing body parts to different individuals and populations allowed for a greater distribution of relics amongst believers (Nickell 73).

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty 51-52.

³⁶ C. Freedman 141.

³⁷ *Treasures of Heaven* 22.

³⁸ *Treasures of Heaven* 22.

rituals at the shrines of early martyrs often mimicked those at pagan shrines.³⁹ Early Christianity thus presented “a cosmic structure” that modern society has since lost, including a conception of the body as being far more porous, open to the world around it.⁴⁰ Early as well as medieval Christians generally believed that every part of the human body survived in some form at death; even if the body had been dismembered, it would be reassembled at the Last Judgment, albeit in a transformed state.⁴¹ This reassembled body was believed to be similar to the immortal flesh before the fall of man that Augustine speaks of in *City of God*: “this human flesh of ours was differently constituted before man’s sin [...] it was possible for this flesh never to suffer death [...] This condition changed after man’s sin, and man’s flesh became what it has always been known to be in this distressful situation of mortality.”⁴² Any sign of positively-transformed flesh in the recently deceased, then, was believed to be a sign of sanctity, and the most prominent corporeal sign, of course, was incorruptibility.⁴³

The bodily remains of saints were crucial in providing a visibility and tangibility to invisible and intangible essences and beliefs. They seemed to appeal to a human need for something “more physical, empirical, and sensory” to establish the reality of saintly presence,⁴⁴ and they also bonded Christianity with an idea common to many religions: that a particular life-force remains in the dead body and that its maintenance is essential for the afterlife.⁴⁵ Plutarch, for instance, in the first century AD writes that the body and soul are molded and mixed in the

³⁹ C. Freedman 9-10; Eliade 164.

⁴⁰ Eliade 172. Charles Freedman as well writes that most medieval people lived in a community of the supernatural (xiii).

⁴¹ Two psalms were used to support this belief: “He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken” (KJV, Psalm 34:20) and “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption” (KJV, Psalm 16:10); *Treasures of Heaven* 21; C. Freedman 18.

⁴² *City of God* Book XXI:8; C. Freedman 18.

⁴³ Vauchez 427.

⁴⁴ Montgomery 3.

⁴⁵ Koudoumaris 21.

same substance.⁴⁶ Although not Christian himself, Plutarch does indeed capture many of the paradoxes in early Christianity, particularly the union of spirit and body.⁴⁷ The body, for early and medieval Christians was very much intrinsic to spiritual endurance, both in life and death.

An early Christian tradition of martyrdom also helped solidify this profound connection with the material body. Martyrdom, the sacrifice of one's corporeal body for God, was considered to be automatic assurance of salvation. Legends of martyrs rejoicing in the midst of their tortures were widely popular, such as the story of St. Lawrence of Rome (c. 225-258 AD), who cheerfully requested to be turned over to the other side as he was roasted on a gridiron.⁴⁸ This ability of martyrs to transcend corporeal and psychological limitations of pain and fear indicated that their flesh had already been transformed by God's grace and their public performance of this superhuman strength drew many new followers to the faith.⁴⁹⁵⁰

But when Christianity was legalized by Constantine in 313 AD, the principal source of relics disappeared along with the plethora of martyrs who had been executed under the Roman emperors. Thus, the practice of Christian pilgrimage arose, in part, as a means to discover, circulate, and venerate a more extensive supply of tangible items for a religion that, until this point, had sustained itself on the bodies of martyrs.⁵¹ Helena, Constantine's mother, traveled to the Holy Land, where she unearthed relics that had touched the body of Christ and his disciples, such as a fragment of the True Cross and the nails that had joined Christ's body to it, and built churches in places connected to Jesus' life.⁵² Other Christians followed suit, seeking out the

⁴⁶ Plutarch 217.

⁴⁷ See also Jeremiah 25.

⁴⁸ C. Freedman 20.

⁴⁹ Notably, in the second century, Tertullian converted to Christianity after being impressed by the way Christians embraced death. His *Apologeticum*, written in 197 AD, taunts the provincial governors, "we multiply the more we are mown down by you: the blood of Christ is seed" (Robinson 10).

⁵⁰ C. Freedman 20.

⁵¹ See Robinson 14-17; Nickell 74-75.

⁵² Robinson 17-21.

remains of martyrs hastily tucked away in catacombs and building churches on these sites for pilgrims to visit.⁵³

These bodies called audiences of pilgrims from afar to be in their presence: to touch, kiss, smell, and taste their remains. “Relic fever” dominated the medieval period. Upon their deaths, the bodies of holy people were opened, eviscerated, dismembered, boiled, divided, beheaded, and dispersed across Europe and the Middle East. Ravenous crowds would sometimes gather even before the death of a holy individual. For example, when Nikon, a preacher in the Peloponnese who called himself “ho Metanoelite” (“Repent Ye”) died around the year 1000, the restless crowd he had summoned to his deathbed reportedly threw themselves on the corpse: pulling hair from his beard and ripping his garments to shreds.⁵⁴ When Thomas Becket was murdered in 1170, Benedict of Peterborough recounts that onlookers rushed to soak up his blood in their clothing and rub it on their eyes and ailments.⁵⁵ When Thomas Aquinas died in 1244, the guardians of his body were able to protect it only a couple of months before he was decapitated and his flesh boiled away so his bones could be used for relics.⁵⁶

This zealous, indeed ravenous, desire for holy bodies was justified by scripture and important early Christian texts. In the Book of Kings, for instance, the bones of the prophet Elisha are used to bring a dead man back to life.⁵⁷ In the Acts of the Apostles, when believers touched handkerchiefs and aprons to the body of St. Paul, “diseases departed from them and the evil spirits went out of them.”⁵⁸ In Book 22 of *City of God*, St. Augustine describes the miracles that were brought about by the relics of the martyr Stephen: “a blind woman entreated that she

⁵³ Craughwell xiii; Pringle 263.

⁵⁴ J. Smith 592.

⁵⁵ C. Freedman 4.

⁵⁶ Vauchez 431.

⁵⁷ KJV, 2 Kings 13:21.

⁵⁸ KJV, Acts 19:11-12; Craughwell xvii.

might be led to the bishop who was carrying the relics. He gave her the flowers he was carrying. She took them, applied them to her eyes, and forthwith saw.”⁵⁹ Accounts of the miracles of early and medieval saints often mimic the miracles of the Bible: Becket’s relics reportedly cured the paralyzed, blind, deaf, lame, and leprous, even raised the dead.⁶⁰ In addition to enacting physical miracles, relics were also the means through which Christ could be prevailed upon. As Charles Freedman writes, the medieval Christian God was “even if on only rare incidents, amenable to pressure [...] those who had suffered as martyrs or had led exemplary lives would also play their part if pleaded by sinners to do so.”⁶¹ Thus, material bodily relics became integral to the spiritual relationships between Christians and God.

Particularly as monarchs and aristocrats became heavily invested in collecting, trading, and selling relics, bodies and body parts were also imbued with a distinctly commercial quality.⁶² This commodification of the dead body is a trait that will characterize its treatment in other periods and contexts, spiritual or otherwise, in the West from this time on. Medieval relics became symbols of prestige, commodities to be traded, talismans, idols, and unifiers of a community, and their vitalness was accepted by nearly all medieval Europeans regardless of class or education.⁶³ Churches depended on the miracles—and profits—generated by their relics.⁶⁴ Religious groups often competed with one another in the race to collect bodies and impress a local population with the powers of their own saint. Anneli Rufus calls cities with major relic shrines such as Spain’s Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury “medieval Disneyland” where crowds of sick and dying pilgrims jostled to get near the relics and

⁵⁹Augustine; Craughwell xiii.

⁶⁰Robinson 38.

⁶¹C. Freedman 13. See also Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage* 135-6.

⁶²See Craughwell xiv; Rufus 5.

⁶³Craughwell xiv.

⁶⁴Robinson 27.

entrepreneurial hawkers lined the streets selling souvenir evidence for the trip.⁶⁵ After Thomas Beckett's death, Benedict of Peterborough condemned the sales of relics from his body, not because of the profanity of the act but because sellers charged too little for such precious spiritual objects.⁶⁶

The high material and spiritual value placed on these saintly corpses, who proved through their bodies that they were in heaven, or at least destined for heaven, is arguably strongly correlated with the careful attention the living paid to preparing the body in life for its preservation in death. Medieval Christians believed that relics were powered by a particular force known as *virtus*. In compensation for their good deeds and bodily sufferings, saints were rewarded by God with *virtus*, which lingered in their bodies and continued to act through their remains after their deaths.⁶⁷ Despite assurances that God possessed the power to reassemble even completely dismantled bodies, the associations that early Christians developed between eternal life, *virtus*, and the intactness of body can perhaps at least partially explain why many medieval people were so anxious about maintaining the integrity of their bodies after death. For example, the thirteenth century mystic Mary of Oignes reportedly allowed her hair to be cut off while she was alive for use as a relic but ordered that the rest of her body remain whole. When a prior tried to extract her teeth after her death, her jaw clenched shut. When he asked her forgiveness, she relented and allowed a few teeth to be removed, but no more.⁶⁸ Other important figures who anticipated that their bodies would be sought for relics swore their followers never to reveal the locations of their tombs.⁶⁹ And a popular strategy of dissenters to stifle a burgeoning cult was to

⁶⁵ Rufus 4.

⁶⁶ C. Freedman 5.

⁶⁷ Vauchez 425.

⁶⁸ C. Freedman 142.

⁶⁹ Robinson 11.

destroy the body of a presumed saint, for it was difficult for a cult to survive without something tangible to venerate.⁷⁰

In addition to taking precautions for the treatment of one's own body in death, instructions that would likely be ignored by relic-hungry followers, one could also prepare oneself for transubstantiation of the body by denying its material urges. There appears to be a strong correlation between asceticism and self-mutilation in life and incorruptibility and *virtus* power after death. In other words, the more disciplined, the more ravaged, the body was in life, the more power and beauty it could potentially have in death. Practices such as wearing hair shirts, extreme fasting, self-flagellation, and mortification of the flesh was believed to punish the body in its advance for its natural inclination to sin.⁷¹ St. Clare of Montefalco, traditionally classified as one of the Incorruptibles, was known for her practices of self-denial and mortification of the flesh.⁷² Thomas Becket, who was widely-known for his opulent lifestyle, was somewhat redeemed after his death by the reported discovery of a hair shirt under his garments.⁷³ As Tertullian writes in his treatise *On Fasting*, "an over-fed," or generally indulgent, Christian "will be more necessary to bears and lions, perchance, than to God."⁷⁴

Self-disciplining practices such as asceticism and abstinence were deemed to be of particular importance for women. Aristotelian tradition taught that the softness of women's bodies, compared to men, reflected the inferiority of their inner worth. Menstruation was a particularly visible example of women's lack of control over their own bodies. Extreme fasting was known to decrease or stop menstrual blood flow, and thus extreme asceticism was believed

⁷⁰ C. Freedman 5.

⁷¹ Pringle 247.

⁷² St. Clare, however, was eviscerated, and therefore cannot truly be considered incorruptible. Her most famous relic is her removed heart, which the members of her order believed presented an image of the cross (Pringle 262).

⁷³ C. Freedman 5.

⁷⁴ Tertullian.

to help women achieve more idealized, stable bodies like those of men.⁷⁵ Possibly as a result of this increased attention to the external manifestations of inner worth in the female body, women, more than men, were reported to manifest holiness in their bodies.⁷⁶ They were more likely to give off heavenly scents in both life and death, fall into ecstatic trances and nosebleeds, and develop physical manifestations of grace on their bodies, including stigmata and espousal rings from Christ.⁷⁷

Female mystics of the late medieval period often demonstrated the transcendence of their bodies publically in performance; St. Clare of Montefalco, for example, would allow her body to be pricked by needles, to which she showed no reaction.⁷⁸ Female mystics took Mary Magdalene as their model, who was rumored to have lived entirely off heavenly sustenance for thirty-three years before her death, levitating seven times a day to receive this nourishment.⁷⁹ Catherine of Siena, whose head and thumb were discovered to be incorrupt after her death, was also reported to have risen from the earth after periods of intense fasting.⁸⁰ Mary of Oignes reportedly “went as long as thirty-five days without any sort of food, passing all the time in a tranquil and happy silence.”⁸¹ Bodies that were lighter in physical weight were also believed to more easily ascend into heaven.⁸² And so the holiness of St. Teresa of Avila was supported by the lightness of her dead body, which was said to be no more than that of a two-year-old child.⁸³ The remarkable restraint these women demonstrated with regards to food also applied to sexual appetite. Gluttony was linked to lust in early Church philosophy; sexual intimacy contaminated and

⁷⁵ C. Freedman 140.

⁷⁶ K. Park, *Secrets of Women* 35.

⁷⁷ Bynum 275; Vauchez 442.

⁷⁸ Vauchez 441.

⁷⁹ C. Freedman 141.

⁸⁰ This heavenly food not only sustained her, ordinary earthly food caused Catherine great suffering, she reported (Thursdton 346).

⁸¹ Thursdton 342.

⁸² See Tertullian.

⁸³ C. Freedman 141.

polluted the body, but abstinence, as Tertullian tells us, helped prepare the body for heaven.⁸⁴

The associations drawn between sex and bodily corruption resulted in the belief that the celibate were particularly likely to remain incorrupt in death. For example, the abbess Æthelthryth's incorruptibility was cited as proof "that she had remained uncorrupted by contact with any man."⁸⁵

Holy women's reported lack of eating (and excretion) was believed to purify and strengthen their "weaker vessels." And if "food loathing," as Julia Kristeva writes, is indeed "perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection," then asceticism and abstinence also become a way to encounter death in another sense.⁸⁶ These modes of bodily self-discipline can be seen as a way of fending off the filth of the abject corpse by consciously developing a new type of body.⁸⁷ The incorrupt corpse, more generally speaking, thus can be envisioned as a conscious metaphysical choice, a way to shape the body in both life and death.⁸⁸ Kristeva also emphasizes that it is "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, and order."⁸⁹ In the case of these mystics and ascetics, a desire for material purification manifests a more universal desire to repel death and its disruption of order. The construct of the saintly or incorrupt body thus provided a category that was diametrically opposed to the abject corpse: a life-imbuing body. In fact, despite their lack of consumption themselves, some female mystics were reportedly able to metaphorically "feed" others through preternatural lactations.⁹⁰ Mystics such as Mechtild of Magdeburg and Catherine of Siena often

⁸⁴ C. Freedman 19; Tertullian.

⁸⁵ *Treasures of Heaven* 22.

⁸⁶ Kristeva 2.

⁸⁷ For Kristeva, the corpse is the "utmost of abjection," "death infecting life," because it confronts us with "what [we] permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3).

⁸⁸ Practices of self-mummification in some East Asian cultures through the consumption of certain preservatives before death reflects a similar impulse (Jeremiah 13).

⁸⁹ Kristeva 4.

⁹⁰ Bynum 273.

used the metaphor of the nursing mother to describe their own sufferings, sometimes implying that their “spilling of blood-milk was *imitation* of Christ’s nurturing and inebriating wounds-breasts.”⁹¹ Catherine of Alexandria was reported to have bled milk rather than blood from her veins when she was beheaded.⁹² Indeed, whether male or female, the bodies of martyrs and saints were considered to be both metaphorical and literal sustenance: the common expression “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” renders their blood, as Victor Turner puts it, “spiritual semen”⁹³—an understanding that incidentally renders the incorrupt body a masculine ideal, such as these women were pressured to achieve.

In contrast to the “normal” putrefying body—the corrupt corpse—whose odors and fluids are largely considered to be horrifying and repugnant, the seeping of the holy body, whether milk, blood, or other substance, was considered to be beneficial and life-giving. In the canonization campaign for Bishop Robert Grosseteste in the thirteenth century, for example, the liquid leaking from his tomb was seen as a sign of his divine election and was collected by his followers.⁹⁴ The “incorrupt” body of Charbel Makhlouf also exuded an oily sweat, which was collected by the faithful for miraculous cures, for sixty-seven years until his body finally decayed in 1965.⁹⁵ Ablution water, water that had come in contact with relics, was used as a way of extending the liquefaction of the saintly body. The most treasured liquid was the water that had been used to wash the bones of a saint during his or her translation, but pilgrims would also pour water over a saint’s tomb so that it would become infused with *virtus* and then drink or bathe in the liquid.⁹⁶ On the feast day of St. Gregory, the monks in the monastery of St. Medardus near

⁹¹ Bynum 273.

⁹² Bynum 273.

⁹³ Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 133.

⁹⁴ Vauchez 429.

⁹⁵ Cruz 35, 57.

⁹⁶ Vauchez 430; Snoek 345.

Soissons would allow the congregation to drink from a mug that belonged to the saint in order to “strengthen their souls and bodies” or take it home to sprinkle their fields and gardens “like dew from heaven.”⁹⁷ The saintly body was thus set up in opposition to the normal decaying body; it seemingly helped to nourish, sustain, and extend the material existence of the living.

One of the most widely-known and characteristic physical signs of a holy corpse was its emission of an odor of sanctity, first perceived in the body of the martyred bishop St. Polycarp in 155 AD. A letter from the Christians of Smyrna wrote that they “perceived such a fragrant smell [from their bishop’s body], as if it were the wafted odour of frankincense or some other precious spice.”⁹⁸ St. Teresa of Avila and St. Thérèse de Lisieux were also said to emit an odor of sanctity and the blood from Padre Pio’s stigmata reportedly emanated a floral scent as well.⁹⁹ André Vauchez writes that the odor of sanctity was so important to many medieval cults that if a corpse did not emit this distinct scent, it might immediately bring a halt to the veneration of the body. Salimbene describes such an incident in 1279 when the cult of Albert of Villa d’Ogna collapsed when it was discovered that a clove of garlic had been placed inside his reliquary in the guise of a relic.¹⁰⁰ Vauchez also notes that followers of an important figure sometimes delayed in the translation of his or her body for fear that a putrefying smell might cast doubt on the individual’s sanctity.¹⁰¹ These last examples also demonstrate how the incorrupt corpse could also be crafted not only through particular ascetic or spiritual practices, but through deception, an important point to which I will return.

⁹⁷ Qtd. from *Miracula s. Gregorii papae* (Snoek 345).

⁹⁸ Thursdton 223. It should be noted that the oil of frankincense was used in the Judeo-Christian tradition to anoint infants and other initiates entering new phases of life. Some scholars believe that the odor of sanctity is actually evidence of covert embalming.

⁹⁹ C. Freedman 262.

¹⁰⁰ Vauchez 428.

¹⁰¹ Vauchez 428.

With the incorrupt body being conceptually crafted as a new way of being for the corpse, pilgrimage for the everyday “corrupt” individual provided a means to access these bodies and their transformative potential. It provided a way to enter a sacred space, set off from profane existence.¹⁰² Pilgrimage, as a ritual, renders the sacred apparent by providing an opportunity for sensory immersion in these bodies. As the bishop of relic-rich Jerusalem, St. Cyril, boasted in the fourth century, “Others only hear but we both see and touch.”¹⁰³ Pilgrims went to great lengths to press their hands or lips against a relic. At a martyr’s festival in the fourth century, John Chrysostom advocates for such full-body interaction, preaching:

Stay beside the tomb of the martyr; there pour out fountains of tears [...]
Embrace the coffin, nail yourself to the chest. Not just the martyrs’ bones but
even their tombs and chests burn with a great deal of blessing. Take holy oil and
anoint your whole body – your tongue, your lips, your necks, your eyes.¹⁰⁴

It was believed that a body’s *virtus* could most effectively be transferred to the pilgrim’s body during sleep, and so he or she would sometimes sleep near the tomb of a saint, fully immersed in the essence of its presence for up to two or three weeks before a miracle was granted.¹⁰⁵

As a ritualistic process, pilgrimage has often been compared to the three-part rite of passage described by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, in which the initiand¹⁰⁶ first undergoes a separation from the community, then enters a liminal transitional period, and, finally, is reintegrated into the community.¹⁰⁷ Both pilgrims and initiands are separated from a

¹⁰² See Eliade 22.

¹⁰³ Cyril 13:22.

¹⁰⁴ Qtd. in C. Freedman 13.

¹⁰⁵ Vauchez 445.

¹⁰⁶ Turner’s term.

¹⁰⁷ In Victor Turner’s essay “Death and the Dead in the Pilgrimage Process,” Turner writes that while a pilgrimage bears many similarities to a rite of passage, it is of a liminoid, not liminal, nature, and it generally does not confer a change in status of the initiand as the rite of passage does. According to Turner, the pilgrimage only becomes a rite of passage if death occurs along the pilgrimage route. In this case, the pilgrim instantly becomes a martyr, transformed on a profound spiritual level (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 121). However, I would argue that pilgrimages are of a liminal nature (as Turner defines it) whenever the pilgrim understands it to bring about a real physical or spiritual change in his or herself (e.g., the recovery of sight).

relatively fixed state of life and social status and pass into a liminal or threshold phase for which their previous existence has not entirely prepared them. In this sense, Turner writes, “they are ‘dying’ from what was and passing into an equivocal domain occupied by those who are (in various ways) ‘dead.’”¹⁰⁸ Pilgrimage thus became a search for material and spiritual identity, an understanding of the nature of life and death and what one could become through an intense performative encounter with a holy corpse. The transformative potentials of pilgrimage were supported by the Church, particularly through its granting of indulgences to those who undertook them or the prescription of pilgrimage as atonement for sin. Indeed, the use of pilgrimage as a replacement for the death penalty seems to also support its status as a death alternative in a more metaphysical sense. For the non-criminal traveler, pilgrimage could also help shape one’s future death. Leslie Farmer writes that it was a common practice for the pilgrim to Jerusalem to bring his shroud to be cut to the size of the Stone of Unction in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the bier on which Jesus was believed to have been anointed.¹⁰⁹ This practice allowed the pilgrim to identify himself with the body of Jesus in both life and death—to literally cut his cloth according to the most ideal incorrupt corpse. Pilgrimage thus became a path to transformation based on both presence (being near the body) and absence (a faith in the intangible works enacted through it).

The theatre of pilgrimage is what renders the absent components of the transformative process present. At its roots, whether manifested in the *Quem quaeritis* tradition or in pilgrimage, theatre originates with the unquenchable desire to see, touch, and be filled with the intangible presence of the body. In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte notes that self-flagellation was a performative event for mystics in the thirteenth and fourteenth

¹⁰⁸ Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 122.

¹⁰⁹ Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 121.

centuries, who would often conduct these rituals publically for an audience. Performative practices such as self-mutilation or others that “expose [the artist] to bodily injury and risk” are incredibly compelling because they present the moment “the audience fears the most and which it feverishly awaits. Its deepest fears, fascination, and sensational curiosity are unleashed in this moment.”¹¹⁰ Theatre exists between the profane and sacred, between materiality and transcendence, at the limits of mortal peril, the limit of the corpse. A fourth century instance of Bishop Ambrose harnessing the theatrical power of pilgrimage for his own political ends provides a good example of this. Deeply embroiled in a battle with the emperor over the loyalty of the populace, Ambrose was in need of the bones of martyrs to consecrate his new basilica and win the public’s favor. Ambrose publically announced that he had been told in a dream where some martyrs were buried and led a crowd to the site. When the people assembled, a victim of demonic possession emerged from the crowd and cried out that the bodies they found were those of two martyrs named Gervasius and Protasius. A blind man rubbed a cloth on the bones and across his face, and his sight was miraculously restored.¹¹¹ Other miracles followed. As Charles Freedman writes, in this moment, Ambrose instituted an important precedent that was to be vital to the medieval cults of the saints. He had:

dramatis[e]d relics so that they became a public demonstration of sacred power. And this power could be channeled to achieve the ends of the celebrant who controlled it. Ambrose was manipulating centuries-old rituals of display in a completely new context [...].¹¹²

Ambrose helped to solidify the concept that body parts themselves had healing power without needing to be imbued with power from the gods in a sacrificial ritual. This was a revolutionary—

¹¹⁰ Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power* 13-14.

¹¹¹ In a letter, Ambrose wrote: "I found the fitting signs, and on bringing in some on whom hands were to be laid, the power of the holy martyrs became so manifest, that even whilst I was still silent, one was seized and thrown prostrate at the holy burial-place. We found two men of marvelous stature, such as those of ancient days. All the bones were perfect, and there was much blood." St. Augustine also witnessed these events and relates them in his *Confessions* (C. Freedman 17).

¹¹² C. Freedman 17.

and dramatic—strategy. With performative instincts, Ambrose had made use of pagan rituals and infused them with visible transformative power. The Greek and Roman philosophers had advocated for suppressing bodily desires in the interest of higher contemplation; but Christian relic veneration practices raised the body itself to a new power, as Freedman argues.¹¹³ Countless other saintly rituals, such as the Januarian ritual conducted in Naples several times each year illustrate the persistent power of the body in a performative tradition. During the Januarian ritual, a priest holds the congealed blood of St. Januarius in front of a reliquary of fragments of the martyr’s skull while the congregated audience passionately calls out, “Give us our miracle! St. Januarius, delight us!” as Joe Nickell reports. After a period of time, the substance in the vial usually acquiesces to perform its liquefaction, and it may then be taken on a procession throughout the cathedral or outside into the streets.¹¹⁴

But there is a “shadow side,” to use Jung’s term, to the theatre of pilgrimage as well.¹¹⁵ Whereas the profane, corrupt body needed to be contained, punished, tempered with abstinence and self-mutilation, the saintly body could and should be opened to the world. And the forces unleashed by its opening could have a powerful effect on a community. Because pilgrimage brings the traveler to a place that is outside of time and profane space, because it teeters so perilously into the liminal, it seems to also go hand in hand with disorganization and violence. The Crusades, of course, began as a solemn pilgrimage and devolved into horrific warfare.¹¹⁶ Vast crowds, particularly drawn from the uneducated and superstitious, would flock to the source of rumors of a relic that had brought miracles. During feast days, crowds would often grow so thick and frenzied that pilgrims who stumbled while trying to reach a reliquary might be

¹¹³ C. Freedman 18.

¹¹⁴ Tradition holds that if it fails to convert, an imminent disaster will take place (Nickell 77-78). Skeptics believe that the liquid is not blood, but another substance that liquefies against the heat of the hand.

¹¹⁵ Clift 113.

¹¹⁶ Clift 114.

trampled to death. We find this “shadow side” in contemporary times and in other faiths as well, such the stampedes in Mecca during Hajj that periodically kill hundreds of worshippers. Time and again, as I will attempt to show throughout this project, the opened and dismembered body seems to unleash a Dionysian frenzy of emotion and instincts that overtake reason and often devolve into violence.

This is the danger in the carnival or the sacrifice: that the authoritative powers will lose control of the moment. As relic veneration and pilgrimages grew alarmingly out of control in the later medieval period, we see attempts on the part of authorities to regain power over these practices and the cults of the saints, both from within the Church and without. The Church had notably increased its watchful eye over the pilgrim by the eleventh century, as Diana Webb notes. Special liturgical ceremonies blessing the staff and satchel of the pilgrim were perhaps, in part, an attempt to guarantee that “the penitential pilgrim should surely not have been allowed to slip out of his neighbourhood unnoticed.”¹¹⁷ In fact, by the late medieval period, the Church was even threatening excommunication to those who appeared to take up the pilgrim’s path with less than pious intentions.¹¹⁸ And, of course, the practice of pilgrimage, and the profiteering of the almshouses at the expense of the pilgrim’s naivety, became one of the Protestant’s Reformation’s most persuasive objects of critique.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the cults of the saints were powerful, often gaining great wealth from the displays of the relics of saints or martyrs that were declared to be “more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold.”¹²⁰ In contrast, Jan Hus’ stringent attack on blood relics, *De Sanguine Christi*, touts faith-based New Testament passages

¹¹⁷ Webb 21.

¹¹⁸ C. Freedman 201.

¹¹⁹ C. Freedman 220.

¹²⁰ Craughwell xiii. For instance, a well-known trick that was played on pilgrims to Hailes used a vial of blood that pilgrims would only be able to see clearly after some act of penance, likely a donation. The vial was nearly opaque on one side and clear on the other, so the monk holding the vial could rotate it at will (Clift 120).

such as “Blessed are they that have not yet seen, and yet have believed” as proper guidance for Christians.¹²¹ Martin Luther, as well, condemned the superstitious practices at shrines as a return to polytheism and idolatry.¹²² But, in a broader sense, we might conceive of these criticisms, and the ambitions of the Protestant Reformation in general, as an attempt to control the influence of the opened body, which had become palpably evident. Indeed, the material attacks Reformers waged against churches, cathedrals, and monasteries, which destroyed many of the relics and incorruptible bodies that the Church had venerated provides a powerful image of a desire to defeat the influence of the body.

Nevertheless, once unleashed, the performative practices of the display of relics had escalated into their own order of reality in the medieval period. The Church had gone to great lengths to preserve the concept of the saintly body, often through intentionally or unintentionally deceptive practices. In the medieval age, when incorruptibility was so crucial to beautification or canonization, religious houses would reportedly sometimes pick the best preserved corpse from the catacombs during translation rather than take care to find the actual potential saint’s remains.¹²³ Many saints reported to be incorrupt have since been covered with silicone masks or wax, so the true appearance of their bodies remains a mystery. For example, when investigators examined the display of the incorruptible body of St. Clare of Assisi in the 1980s, they found it was not a mummified body at all, but a silver mask and mannequin of the saint. Inside it, the saint’s bones were tied together with silver wire cloth and pitch.¹²⁴ Heather Pringle notes this “pious fraud” was likely enacted without malice by St. Claire’s order, the Poor Clares. Instead of having an urn or reliquary made, they had constructed a *corpus sanctos*, “a holy body.” Recent

¹²¹ C. Freedman 221.

¹²² C. Freedman 228; Robinson 34.

¹²³ Pringle 265.

¹²⁴ Pringle 266.

studies have shown there are as many as seventy of these bodies gracing European churches.¹²⁵ The lifelike visage of Saint Bernadette Soubirous who appears on the cover of Cruz's *The Incorruptibles* is actually a wax mask, although the cover fails to mention this. St. Silvan, a martyr from the fourth century currently displayed in Croatia, is touted in numerous sources as an incorruptible body despite the fact that the accompanying pictures of his uncannily perfect body, complete with a vicious slash in the neck, is clearly formed of wax or another artificial material.¹²⁶ In fact, given the importance of incorruptibility in the faith, one has to wonder if some bodies were dismembered in the medieval period simply *because* they were obviously decaying and thus the illusion could be better preserved in pieces. But it is my belief that these saintly "frauds" were also motivated, on a very fundamental level, by something far more melancholic and less disheartening than greed or corruption.¹²⁷ But it also seems poignantly related to a universal calling to preservation, both the preservation of a religious system that had built itself on a constructed body and the preservation of one's own sense of self.

These beautified Incorruptibles thus might serve as visual icons of our conceptions of death. We seem to never be able to confront death as it is in reality (whatever that might mean); we confront death only as it is beautified, controlled, contained. As Baudrillard observes, today the dead are expected to appear to us in a "natural" (read "living") state,¹²⁸ a fiction that lies on the surface of the body. This masks the true natural state of the corpse, that of decay and putrefaction. In its desire to not only preserve the physical body, but the very *idea* of the saintly or incorrupt body, medieval Christianity participated in a theatrical process of the construction of

¹²⁵ Fulcheri and colleagues feared that insects would devour the body and received permission to place her in a human-shaped reliquary with a porcelain mask (Pringle 267).

¹²⁶ See, for example, "Incorrupt Bodies of the Saints."

¹²⁷ For instance, a well-known trick that was played on pilgrims to Hailes used a vial of blood that pilgrims would only be able to see clearly after some act of penance, likely a donation. The vial was nearly opaque on one side and clear on the other, so the monk holding the vial could rotate it at will (Clift 120).

¹²⁸ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 180.

memory, of willful forgetting. The corrupt body, in this sense, becomes the sacrificial scapegoat for a human compulsion towards the sacred.

Arguably, the carefully displayed relic body highlights a movement towards the containment of death. The role of the incorrupt corpse as a model for followers to emulate suggests that our ultimate goal should be to defy death, and, thus, as Jean Baudrillard argues, death became an invented concept, not a natural process—subject to interpretation, fluid in definition.¹²⁹ In this grand masquerade of self-deception, the incorrupt body helped institute a tradition in which the opening of the dead body is employed to tell us about our own interiority and potential. As exceptional they were, incorrupt bodies helped redefine natural death as unnatural, as abject. These saintly bodies, too, thus became sacrificial bodies, not only to a religion that relied upon them for sustenance, but to a worldview in which death can be triumphed over.

Today, the appeal of the saintly relic has never fully lost its power. A thriving economy of pilgrimage and relic veneration has continued into the twenty-first century. Dust from the tomb of Christ and bone fragments of saints are peddled on EBay and Amazon. In 1993, two splinters allegedly from the True Cross sold at a Paris auction for roughly \$18,000.¹³⁰ Catholic travel companies organize elaborate tours to see the bodies of saints such as Bernadette of Lourdes and Catherine of Bologna. When the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, affectionately known as the “Little Flower,” toured the US in 1999-2000, Ireland in 2001 and England in 2009, millions of people turned out to touch or kiss the reliquary.¹³¹ More than two million visitors (pilgrims) flocked to Turin in the summer of 2010 during a six-week exhibition of the Shroud.¹³²

¹²⁹ See Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 146.

¹³⁰ Rufus 6.

¹³¹ Ivereigh.

¹³² “Shroud Exhibitions;” C. Freedman xii.

And it is my belief that the continued appeal of these displays can very much be attributed to the powerful nature of the performative corpse. It is not my intention to critique or disparage the faith placed by believers in material relics, but merely to point out how significant the body is on a metaphysical level in a Christian, and, more broadly-speaking, Western tradition and how pervasive the desire to contain death within the limits of understanding is. Although the body might now be envisioned in Western society as a closed entity, “prior to this conceptual shift, death and decomposition were among the acts of bodily drama that were once played out on a more public stage,” helping to construct new conceptions of death.¹³³ Death, by the early modern period, ceased to be the “Grim Reaper” (the skeletal companion of the medieval *danse macrabe*) and instead became a “psychological interiorization;” our current “anguish concerning death.”¹³⁴ But as I will attempt to demonstrate in each of the following chapters, even in the medico-scientific realm, this desire to find the greater meaning in the corpse was not lost. Repressed, but not lost. Encountering the performative corpse helps us find what is sacred in our material existences and what inspires our vanity: a need to experience the world from within our bodies, and, ultimately, to protect, shape, and preserve them—in both life and death.

¹³³ Koudounaris 14.

¹³⁴ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 146.



Figure 2: Variation on the “Three Living and the Three Dead” (fifteenth century), attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder. Image courtesy of The British Museum.

Figure 3: *La Danse Macabre* by Guy Marchant (1486): The Pilgrim and the Shepherd.



Figure 4: The incorruptible body of St. Zita (1212-1272) on display at the Basilica of San Frediano in Lucca, Tuscany, Italy. Photograph by Myrabella (Creative Commons License).



Figure 5: The incorruptible body of St. John Vianney (1786-1859), wearing a wax mask, on display above the main altar in his shrine in Ars-sur-Formans, France. Photograph by Herwig Reidlinger (Creative Commons License).

CHAPTER 2

Reading the Entrails: Sacrifice and Sense in the Early Modern Anatomical Theatres

In 1533, a surgeon and two doctors conducted what might be the first known autopsy in the New World on conjoined twin girls, Joana and Melchiora, who died eight days after their birth.¹ Fernández de Oviedo, a historian and explorer, had the opportunity to visit the girls and their family prior to their deaths, along with a number of civic and religious officials and a small crowd of curious onlookers.² During Oviedo's visit, the two girls were dramatically unwrapped in front of an audience of spectators and revealed to be connected at the abdomen but separated above and below. They sometimes cried, slept, and defecated simultaneously; at other times, they acted of their own minds. Their father had reluctantly paid for two baptisms instead of one, as the local priest was unsure whether "they actually represented two bodies and two souls or only one."³ When the girls died, their parents consented to have them cut open in order to be absolutely certain of this matter.⁴ This autopsy revealed that the twins had "the full complement of entrails to be found in two human beings," only their livers were finely fused together. As a result, it was confirmed that they were "two separate persons and two souls," for in this age, separate organs meant separate selves.⁵

In some ways, the circumstances surrounding the opening of these infant bodies may seem to be quite different than the topic of this chapter: the early modern anatomical theatres in which the corpses of executed criminals were eviscerated to the bone in front of a medical community and sometimes members of the general public. A postmortem or autopsy, by nature,

¹ Jimenez 618.

² As recorded in Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* (Jimenez 618-19).

³ Qtd. in Jimenez 618-19.

⁴ Jimenez 619.

⁵ Jimenez suggests that the detailed description of the livers and gallbladders likely reflects acceptance of Empedocle's theory that the soul was housed in the liver (619).

is a much more private investigation into either the cause of death of a specific person or, as it was for some potential medieval saints, the sanctity of his or her soul. It is inherently different than the anatomy lecture, a ritual that anonymized the body as it anatomized it, erasing the particulars of selfhood in the interest of universal illustration. Unlike the privately autopsied body, the corpse in the public anatomy is often considered to have been little more than a demonstrative prop for the conveyance of classical medical wisdom. Therefore, this autoptic glimpse into Joana and Melchiora's brief life, I believe, is important because in many ways it helps introduce a fuller picture of the proceedings of the anatomical theatre that I wish to present here.⁶

First, on the most obvious level, Joanna and Melchiora were objects for an audience: the curious bystanders who came from all edges of the city to gawk at this apparent anatomical monstrosity. There is also a distinctly theatrical setting to these events: the unwrapping of the bodies can be likened to the dramatic reveal of the curtain, which lays life bare and yet heightened. Similarly, in the anatomical theatres of London, Leiden, Bologna, or Padua, crowds gathered to watch anatomists dramatically display their prowess over the body, particularly in the Italian theatres of the early to mid-sixteenth century, in which anatomists such as Andreas Vesalius and Jacopo Berengario da Carpi became stars in their own right. Second, the exoticism implied in Oviedo's tale of New World wonders reminds us that the stories circulating in Europe depicting far-off lands and peoples had a significant impact on Europeans' views of their own anatomical practices. For instance, just as the "barbaric" cannibalistic practices of some cultures in the Americas was virulently condemned, corpse medicine, including the ingesting of the flesh

⁶ Katharine Park, as well, argues that the proceedings of the public anatomical theatre can only fully be understood in the context of the more frequently occurring private anatomies and autopsies of this time period (*Secrets of Women* 16).

and blood of executed criminals, soared to new popularity in many European countries.⁷ Therefore, we must view the proceedings of the anatomical theatres within this broader context, taking into account both the spiritual significance of opening the body in a Christian tradition, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the increasing access Europeans had to the rituals and spiritual practices of foreign cultures concerning life and death. Perhaps most significantly, the concern over the physical and metaphysical linkages between Joanna and Melchiora reminds us that the nature of *psyche* and *soma* in the early modern period was complex and changing. Europeans of a Pre-Cartesian era found spirits residing in bodily organs and personality emerging from the humors, they emphatically debated the literality or symbolism of the Eucharist, and they most certainly did not view the body with our modern clinical distance.

Whether postmortem of an anatomical anomaly or public dissection, opening the human body, as I have suggested, is never driven exclusively by a desire to understand physiological structures or biological impetuses.⁸ Early modern study of anatomy introduced and reinscribed important messages concerning social hierarchies and the nature of criminality, punishment and power, but more than this, it played an important role in developing understandings of metaphysical selfhood and human interiority.

In order to fully comprehend the significance of the public anatomy on this level, it is essential to attempt the difficult task of undoing centuries of Cartesian-influenced thought processes that deny the importance of body-based intelligence in understanding the self and shared experience. It has been a central project of the humanities in recent decades to bring our focus back to embodied understandings, back to the senses and our affective and

⁷ Sugg 2.

⁸ There is much evidence that public anatomy rituals did little to advance medical knowledge, particularly early in the period, as they were often primarily used to demonstrate the authority of the anatomist or existing anatomical knowledge. See Klestinec 18; Carlino 2-7; Nunn 9.

phenomenological understandings of existence. Most scholarly treatments of the early modern anatomical theatres—indeed, of the early modern playhouse as well—describe these venues primarily as auditory and visual performance grounds. In order to convey a more fully embodied reading of these theatres, I am interested in investigating all the other sensory engagements stimulated in these spaces. Vision and hearing are perhaps the most reified of the senses, but it is the other neglected senses, including taste, smell, and touch, that are perhaps the most involved in boundary transformation and transgression. I am concerned here as well with “common sense,” not only in terms of what classical and Scholastic philosophers identified as a biological “metasense” (*sensus communis*) that unifies all of the sensory organs, but also in terms of what seems to me to be only natural: a vital need to acknowledge a life, an *élan vital*, that is felt just as much in the depths of one’s bones as it is in the immaterial psyche.

The early modern anatomical theatres staged the meeting of body and soul, scalpel and skin, heart and mind, interior essences and external projections; they presented a drama of border instability set at the *limen* of human experience. In order to fully understand the sensory impact of anatomization, I believe that an inquiry into the intersections between the early modern dramatic theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and the anatomical theatres becomes integrally useful. For what Shakespeare does so masterfully is elucidate the *sentiments* of the body. Shakespeare had a relentless interest in the “felt” experience of being human: how love shakes us, pain weighs us down, and rage inflames the soul-harboring liver.⁹ Just as anatomy transforms the body’s internals into externals, Shakespeare’s poetry presents some of humanity’s finest attempts at verbalizing what is felt in embodiment but often fails tragically in language.

⁹ “I am he that is so love-shak’d; I pray you tell me your remedy” (Orlando, *As You Like It* 3.2.274); “But were we burdened with like weight of pain” (Adriana, *Comedy of Errors* 2.1.36); “My knight, I will inflame thy noble liver/ And make thee rage” (Pistol, *Henry IV, Part II* 5.5.24-25).

Studying the intersections of the early modern dramatic theatres' portrayal of the body and the anatomical theatres' presentations, then, helps bring attention back to the *sensation* (in all senses of the word) of public dissection.¹⁰ In addition to being an important civic event—a demonstration and reinforcement of social, academic, and judicial hierarchies—the public anatomical ritual is also a ritual with deeper ontological urgings. This ritual presents a concrete (but no less dramatic) counterpart to the emotional and psychological tragedies of life and death played out in the early modern playhouse, but it also reveals resonances of the sacrificial rite. By more deeply analyzing what Levi-Strauss first called the “sensory codes” of the anatomical ritual, we can see just how integral these first public forays into the interior of the human body were in constructing modern notions of self.¹¹

Before delving further into the metaphysical richness of the rituals and sensations of the early modern anatomical theatre, it is important to first lay out at least a brief background of scientific human dissection and the rise of the anatomical drama. The history of Western anatomical dissection began in Greece during the fourth to second centuries BC, when it is believed that human dissections were conducted by a handful of physicians, including Herophilus of Chalcedon and Erasistratus of Chios.¹² Generally-speaking, however, opening the corpse was prohibited in Greek culture, and, before and after this time, there is little evidence of

¹⁰ Although I must recognize that the anatomical theatres and the dramatic theatres, of course, developed differently in different regions in Europe. Even though I am drawing together examples from anatomical theatres in Italy with dramatic examples primarily from the English playhouses, I understand that the drama of Shakespeare and his English contemporaries, in this time, was not entirely widespread across the European continent. However, there was a great deal of exchange of ideas between countries that facilitated some important commonalities between different regions where anatomists and playwrights practiced their respective crafts (Landers 15). While I do not intend to overgeneralize these commonalities, what I am interested in examining here are the underlying human impulses that seem to motivate the attention paid to the body in these respective theatres.

¹¹ See Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*. Although I do not take the same approach in understanding the senses as being structured like a language, Lévi-Strauss's work provides a useful starting point for understanding the significance of the senses in crafting the essence and impact of the ritual.

¹² Von Staden 223.

its practice until the medieval period.¹³ Instead, for over a thousand years, it was the wisdom of the physician Galen (130-c.200 AD), a man whose knowledge of human anatomy was based primarily on the dissection of monkeys and pigs, that guided the understanding of medieval and early modern physicians. During the medieval period, autopsies were occasionally ordered, particularly in the case of a suspicious death of an important figure or to find bodily evidence of holiness in a potential saint, but anatomies in the interest of general medical knowledge were uncommon.¹⁴ Dissections for anatomical study appear to have been taken up again in Bologna at the end of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and became a regular component of university medical education in Bologna and Padua by the fifteenth century and soon after in Rome.¹⁵ Civic and academic statutes in the various Italian cities instituted sanctioned annual public anatomies throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, bestowing the bodies of a small number of executed criminals annually to various universities for public dissection.¹⁶ In 1540, Henry VIII issued the Barber-Surgeons their official charter, allowing them to claim the bodies of four condemned prisoners a year for public anatomy lectures. In 1565, Elizabeth I granted the same allowance to the Barber-Surgeons more erudite rivals, the College of Physicians.¹⁷ Consequently, at the same time as Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, and Jonson were capturing the theatrical imagination of the London public, these groups of surgeons and physicians were also putting on spectacular displays of the human body.

¹³ French 1.

¹⁴ It was once believed that Pope Boniface VIII had issued an outright ban on human dissections in 1300, but this decree was actually designed to deter a more specific practice of the Crusaders, who were boiling the bodies of their fallen compatriots in order to send less weighty remains back home (French 11).

¹⁵ Ghadesi 149; Carlino 2. Katharine Park argues that medieval Christian culture was not hindered by anything resembling a fear of corpse pollution such as that which deterred the ancient Greeks from human dissection (*Secrets of Women*, 23).

¹⁶ See Carlino 78.

¹⁷ Nunn 4.

But for the first couple of centuries of their existence in Europe, public anatomies did little to advance scientific knowledge. The dissected body was treated by university officials more or less as a visual aid to enhance a lector's recitation of classical medical texts such as Galen's *De usu partium corporis humani* or Avicenna's *Il canone della medicina*.¹⁸ Andrea Carlino notes that the evidence provided by the first human dissections in the late medieval period should have immediately been able to correct the errors of Galen, yet he persisted as the anatomical authority for centuries.¹⁹ Anatomists were perhaps hesitant to question written ancient wisdom and, consequently, the authority of the medical profession that based itself upon it.²⁰ But when anatomists such as Andreas Vesalius entered the scene in the mid-sixteenth century and advocated for the performative practice of "seeing for oneself," anatomy came to be seen as a way of gaining new knowledge about the human body. Subsequently, the anatomical theatre became far more popular and intriguing, and the autopsied body—the performative corpse—truly emerged as a source of self-knowledge.

Early public anatomies were first held in temporary scaffold theatres erected in local university or church courtyards. Permanent anatomical theatres, shaped like amphitheatres, were constructed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in numerous locations in Europe including London, Padua, Leiden, and Bologna. Early anatomical theatres, such as the one constructed in Padua in 1594, although called public, seem to have been largely limited to medical faculty and students. Soon, however, many of these theatres expanded to entertain a broader range of audience members, including friends of civic officials, even "fishmongers and

¹⁸ Carlino 11. Later, anatomists such as Andreas Vesalius would argue that the corpse itself should serve as a dynamic text to be read (Vesalius, "Author's Preface" xlvi-liv).

¹⁹ Carlino 7.

²⁰ Carlino 7; Nunn 6. Or perhaps, the stubborn persistence of Galenic thought is further evidence of the fact that an inductive scientific method had yet to take hold in Europe.

shoemakers.”²¹ Although the public were never quite as welcome at anatomical demonstrations in England as in Italy, the Netherlands, and France,²² curious laypeople who could not gain admittance reportedly crowded at the windows of the Barber-Surgeon’s theatre for a peek at the proceedings—that is until the company was forced to combat the pressing crowds by requiring tickets to view the body.²³

The demonstrations of the anatomical theatre encouraged the marriage of theatrical spectacle and anatomy, sometimes struggling to find the balance between utmost scientific solemnity and bacchanal festival. Lavish meals were often served after lectures; human flesh seemingly carved as an appetizer. Eighteenth century accounts condemned the riotous scenes of drunken and sexual debauchery that accompanied public executions, and it is probable that such festivity spilled over into the ensuing dissections.²⁴ Bologna’s anatomies were traditionally held during Carnival time in January and February, and authorities frequently struggled to subdue inappropriate behavior amongst masked, inebriated, and armed spectators, including “chatting, laughing, asking indecent questions or grabbing hold of the organs prepared by the dissector.”²⁵ Scuffles occasionally broke out amongst overexcited audience members.²⁶ Indeed, as Giovanna

²¹ Klestinec 73, 14.

²² Jan C.C. Rupp argues that Peter Linebaugh (in *The London Hanged*) and others unjustifiably speak of public dissections in London. Rupp claims that London dissections were attended by surgeons, physicians, and medical students, but were not open to the general public (49).

²³ Nunn 6.

²⁴ Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 62. As Bernard Mandeville later described it in 1725, “The Days [of executions] being known before-hand, they are a Summons to all Thieves and Pickpockets, of both Sexes, to meet. Great Mobs are a Safeguard to one another, which makes these Days Jubilees, on which old Offenders, and all who dare not shew their Heads on any other, venture out of their Holes; and they resemble Free Marts, where there is an Amnesty for all Outlaws. All the Way, from *Newgate to Tyburn*, is one continued Fair, for Whores and Rogues of the meaner Sort. Here the most abandon’d Rakehells may light on Women as shameless: Here Trollops, all in Rags, may pick up Sweethearts of the same Politeness: And there are none so lewd, so vile, or so indigent, of either Sex, but at the Time and Place aforesaid, they may find a Paramour” (Mandeville).

²⁵ Qtd. in Nunn 9. In London, anatomical dissections may have occurred more periodically throughout the year (Cregan 52). The months of January and February, however, were the most practical, as they are the coldest months of the year and thus the most conducive to preserving a corpse. They also marked a break between the fall and spring sessions for medical students, allowing a greater number of attendees (Klestinec 14).

²⁶ Carlino 84; Nunn 9; Ferrari 99.

Ferrari and Andrea Carlino both assert, Carnival season was the period in which transgressions of social norms were the most tolerated, and this arguably made the act of dissection more palatable because “it took place at a time when every form of subversion and inversion was concealed under the guise of performance.”²⁷ The much-discussed dissection scene depicted in the woodcut frontispiece of Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica* perhaps conveys the sensational atmosphere of the anatomical ritual better than any other, with its urgent crowds pressing to get near the body, dissectors squabbling under the table over surgical instruments, and its ominously large skeleton looming over the procedure [See Figure 6].²⁸ In fact, the setting of this fantastical dissection does not depict any existing anatomical theatre, but rather appears to have been copied from an edition of Terence or Plautus’ plays, further linking the anatomical lecture and the dramatic tradition.²⁹

Anatomical theatres also shared architectural similarities with Renaissance playhouses from their inception. Before the construction of permanent anatomical theatres, the same space may have been used for dissections as was used for dancing, plays, or other performances.³⁰ In London, the College of Physicians initially held dissections in their hall, but cramped quarters led the college to construct an anatomical theatre in 1583, the first in London, in the same period as some of the major early modern playhouses were being constructed—five years after the Curtain and four years before the Rose. In 1636, Inigo Jones (the designer of London’s Cockpit theatre) was commissioned to design a permanent home for the anatomy demonstrations of the Barber-Surgeons, and there are numerous architectural similarities between the two designs. Both anatomical theatres and early modern playhouses were designed as places to be seen as

²⁷ Carlino 81.

²⁸ See Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 66-69, Nunn 12-19, and Klestinec 30-35 for excellent discussions on this image.

²⁹ Nunn 12.

³⁰ Sawday, “The Paradoxes of Interiority” 2.

much as to see: In the anatomical theatres, seating was arranged according to rank—with the most prominent members of the particular community seated in the spots where they would have both the best view and be the most visible themselves.³¹

As the public visibility of the anatomists and the lavishness of their venues grew, anatomy lectures evolved from solemn academic affairs into more elaborate spectacles of symbolic and civic import.³² In the first anatomical lectures in Padua and Bologna in the fifteenth century, there were three main players in the drama: the *lector* (a physician who read the lecture and orchestrated the anatomy), the *ostensor* (typically also a doctor, who demonstrated the body), and the *sector* (a barber or surgeon who performed the dissection). The anatomist, standing in an elevated position or behind a podium, opened the ritual with a solemn appeal to classical authority and recited from classical medical treatises as the demonstrator and dissector used the body to illustrate the text. Later on, the roles of *lector* and *ostensor* were often conflated as anatomists became greater showmen who demonstrated their own advancements in medical knowledge on the dissected body themselves—although the dirtiest work was often still left to surgeons or medical students.³³ Vesalius is widely credited with forever altering the performance of the anatomical theatre in this new mode. He vehemently criticized the traditional *lectors*, calling them “jackdaws aloft in their high chair, with egregious arrogance croaking things they have never investigated.”³⁴ Those whose fingers actually did the probing, the *sectors*, fared no better in Vesalius’ estimation, as he declared them to be so “ignorant of languages that they are unable to explain their dissections to the spectators and muddle what ought to be displayed.”³⁵

³¹ Cregan, *Theatre of the Body* 50; Klestinec 28.

³² Padua was particularly well known for its dramatic anatomical “performances” that inspired more theatricalized proceedings in other anatomy venues (Klestinec xii).

³³ Klestinec 23.

³⁴ Qtd. in Nunn 11.

³⁵ Qtd. in Nunn 11.

As competition grew for prestige amongst anatomists, so did the boasting. Berengario da Carpi, in 1521, claimed to have displayed the placenta of a hanged woman to “almost five hundred students at the University of Bologna, together with many citizens.”³⁶ Throughout the sixteenth century, the rituals of the anatomical theatres increasingly emphasized presentation. Music was occasionally played during the dissection, possibly to calm the audience or to discourage interruptions.³⁷ Later in the era, the actual process of dissection was largely conducted before the spectators even arrived, which put the focus on the presentation skills of the anatomist during the lecture itself.³⁸ The second permanent theatre constructed in Padua, for example, contained two chambers, an inner room where the cadavers were prepared for presentation and an amphitheatre where the already prepared body parts were demonstrated publicly.³⁹

Meanwhile, as the early modern anatomical theatres probed and theatricalized the previously unexplored realities of the human interior, the dramatists of the late 1500s and early 1600s were consumed with how to convincingly externalize the psyche through the display of the staged body. Hamlet, for example, autopsies himself in soliloquies and then proceeds to dissect and expose the decaying elements of his own “rotten” state: desiring to melt his “too solid flesh,” strengthen “every petty artery in this body,” and end the “heartache and the thousand natural shocks/ That flesh is heir to” before finally unleashing the touch of his blade on both the state and himself.⁴⁰ Perhaps it is a bit overreaching to liken Hamlet’s change in action to the anatomist’s transition from *lector* to *incisor*, but approaching Hamlet from this perspective presents some interesting parallels. Gertrude, indeed, characterizes Hamlet as anatomist when

³⁶ Qtd. in K. Park, “The Criminal and the Saintly Body” 15.

³⁷ Carlino 14; Klestinec 106-107.

³⁸ Klestinec 94.

³⁹ Klestinec 98.

⁴⁰ 1.2.129, 1.4.64, 3.1.68-69.

she tells Claudius that Hamlet has gone “to draw apart the body [Polonius] that he hath killed.”⁴¹ Bodies, both human and celestial, are dissected by Hamlet—and on Shakespeare’s stage in general—to their most miniscule elements. Hamlet mentally reduces the “brave o’erhanging firmament” to a “foul and pestilent congregation of vapours”; man to “the quintessence of dust.”⁴² Lear, as well, as the body of the state, metaphorically rips apart his own being as he divides his kingdom, and like the many self-dissecting anatomical icons of the early modern period [see Figures 9 and 10], he is compelled to examine its inner nature. In *The Atheist’s Tragedy*, D’Amville, too, wishes to perform a dissection on his nephew’s body to determine “what thing there is in Nature more exact/ Than in the constitution of myself.”⁴³ Titus also externalizes and expels his emotions through corporeal metaphors: “My bowels cannot hide her woes,/ But like a drunkard must I vomit them.”⁴⁴ As evidenced on the stage, early moderns found *psyche* and *soma* to be far more intimately interwoven than European and American cultures generally do today, and opening the body to reveal its muscles, its organs, its arteries could not possibly have been seen as an investigation into physiology alone.

Many scholarly treatments of the early modern anatomical theatres recognize the profound import of dissecting a body, extrapolating the ways in which it reinforced social hierarchies and demonstrated academic and judicial power over a criminalized body. Jonathan Sawday writes that “the anatomist, in his scientific jurisdiction over and above the criminal body, expressed the symbolic power of knowledge over the individual, a continuation of the process by which the individual was forced, on the gallows, to acknowledge the legitimacy of the sovereign

⁴¹ 3.4.231

⁴² 2.2.282-287.

⁴³ 5.2.146-7.

⁴⁴ *Titus Andronicus* 3.1.230-1.

power over his or her body.⁴⁵ Carlino, too, argues that the anatomy was an extension of capital punishment, writing that officials considered the moral character of the executed criminal along with his or her physical attributes when determining whether or not he or she should be destined for the dissection table. These bodies, “punished and damned,” he writes, “would continue in their agony even beyond life, since their souls would pay in the hereafter for the sins they had committed.”⁴⁶ Carlino notes as well how closely the dissected cadavers resembled those who had been condemned to post-mortem punishments such as drawing and quartering. Dissected bodies, like quartered bodies, were “profaned and subjected to a series of acts that altered their unitary structure; in addition in both cases, the bodies were exposed in public for lengthy periods and were left unburied,” although he acknowledges that for the dissected cadaver, burial was merely delayed.⁴⁷ In addition, hanging, the preferred mode of execution for criminals condemned to dissection, was a punishment typically associated with the lowest of criminals and the most abominable of crimes. According to accounts such as Carlino’s, once consigned to the anatomical theatre, the corpse played its part in a drama that, like the Foucauldian spectacle of the scaffold, reinforced the judicial power of the state. Katharine Park, as well, notes that there was a “profound dishonor” associated with the anatomical theatre; unlike private dissections, which validated an individual life, public academic anatomies “violated both [the body’s] personhood and its social identity by rendering it unrecognizable.”⁴⁸ Cynthia Klestinec argues that the mere fact that anatomists believed private anatomies to be far more pedagogically effective reveals that public dissections were designed more to display civic power than to be

⁴⁵ *The Body Emblazoned* 64.

⁴⁶ Carlino 93. Katharine Park also characterizes public dissection as a punitive act (“Life of the Corpse” 130).

⁴⁷ Carlino 118.

⁴⁸ Park, *Secrets of Women* 15.

instructive.⁴⁹ And it is certainly true that, as the demand for bodies increased and anatomists began seeking other sources for their cadavers, anatomy became fully entrenched in the marginalization of the lowest members of society. The poor, the criminal, and the insane became looked upon as dispensable human material upon which Europeans could experiment and investigate the human form.⁵⁰

From this epistemological standpoint, the dissected subject is rendered object, a territory to be conquered and colonized. Individuals such as Sawday and Cregan have noted how the respective arts of dissection and cartography developed hand in hand, with anatomists mapping the body like European explorers laid claims in the New World: “dott[ing] their names [Fallopio, Eustachi, etc.] like place-names on a map, over the terrain which they encountered,” as Sawday puts it.⁵¹ Cregan uses the “Banister Portrait,” a painting commemorating the visceral lecture given by John Banister in c. 1580 as an emblematic example of how anatomists charted the body [See Figure 11]. In this portrait, Banister’s hand rests upon the corpse’s exposed visceral organs, some of which have been labeled *intestina* or *hepat[icus]* (liver). Cregan notes that labeling parts of an image was a technique not typically used prior to this time except in printed maps, so this anatomical portrait in effect turns the “body of the [depicted] felon into a mapped territory.”⁵² In further support of these arguments, Phineas Fletcher’s poem *The Purple Island* (1633) develops an extended metaphor characterizing the body as an uncharted territory requiring explication, “a virgin land that can dispense knowledge only if its voice is deciphered and its vagueness

⁴⁹ Carlino 189; Klestinec 78. Kate Cregan, however, argues that anatomical dissection, in London at least, was not conceived of as an extension of justice until the eighteenth century, particularly with the Murder Act of 1751, which specified dissection as a punishment for murder (*The Theatre of the Body* 13).

⁵⁰ Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 3; Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*.

⁵¹ Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 23; Cregan, *Theatre of the Body* 19-22.

⁵² Cregan, *Theatre of the Body* 22.

erased.”⁵³ Like the literary anatomies that were so fashionable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* or John Lyly’s *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wyt*, anatomies of the body enacted a systematic division, analysis, and reorganization of the subject within the boundaries of a system circumscribed by the anatomist.

However, while it is true that the opening of the body in the anatomical theatre had very real social and intellectual implications in rendering the bodies of the criminal or the poor as objects of experimentation, to view the import of the public anatomy only from this perspective is limiting. Indeed, the anatomy lecture was a civic and social ritual that celebrated the leadership of the academic community and the judicial powers that authorized it, but it also plays a part in a long and significant history of ritualistic human sacrifice in which bodies are sacrificed in the interest of preserving the larger community. As highlighted in the previous chapter, death in many cultures, including a Christian tradition, was believed to release surplus energy into the world. Sacrificial death, however, is a particular type of death that arguably is designed to prevent this energy from dispersing and dissipating in a way that is of little use to the living. Sacrifice, as Christian Duverger puts it, is a technology that harnesses and harvests the escaping life force.⁵⁴ Although, I do not intend to suggest that the proceedings of the anatomical theatre fit into the same category of human sacrifice as the sacrificial rituals of ancient cultures such as the Aztecs or Celts because indeed it was of a different order. The “sacrificial victim” in the early modern anatomy lecture was a criminal whose presumed deviant act had stripped him or her of bodily rights and who had already been executed according to judicial custom. The sacrificial victim of the Aztecs, of course, was not necessarily selected because of his overt violation of social order, although he was arguably scapegoated in this manner. Likewise, the retainer

⁵³ Spicci 68. Just to give one example, Fletcher describes the body as “watered with great plenty of rivers, veins, arteries, and nerves” (Fletcher).

⁵⁴ Duverger 369.

sacrifices practiced in ancient Mesopotamian cultures affected mainly innocent attendants who were tied to their masters in life and death. However, what the rites of the anatomical theatre have in common with archaic rituals of cosmic human sacrifice is a body whose death and dismemberment is arguably crucial to the unity and stability of a community. Understanding this aspect requires reexamining the rite from a fresh perspective, situating the dissected body, and not medico-judicial authority, as the central actor in the ritual:

The anatomical ritual as a sacrificial rite begins with the execution of the selected victim. It was common practice that individuals destined for execution were asked to meditate on their similarities to religious figures who underwent similar plights: those to be beheaded were given St. Paul as an example; those to be quartered, St. Hippolytus; and those to be hung, Christ.⁵⁵ Since hanging was least traumatic to the integrity of the corpse, individuals whose destinies lay in dissection would most likely have been instructed to reflect upon Christ hanging on the cross. The symbolic significance of this should not be underestimated, for they too would soon be laid on a sacrificial bier and offered for spiritual, intellectual and physical healing—and it should not be forgotten that Christ too was criminalized in his society. After ceremonial prayers, blessings, and absolution, the condemned approached the gibbet with only the executioner and a spiritual comforter as companions. At the top of the ladder, he or she would be dropped into the hanging space by the executioner, who put pressure on the shoulders while an assistant pulled on the legs, causing, in most cases, an almost immediate death.⁵⁶ The body was then consigned quietly, and usually under the cover of night to minimize disruptions from the individual's family or the public, to representatives of the local university or the Barber-Surgeons in London.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Park, *Secrets of Women* 213.

⁵⁶ Carlino 101-102.

⁵⁷ Park, *Secrets of Women* 213; Carlino 105.

As soon as possible after the execution, in order to minimize the putrefaction of the body, the anatomical demonstration would be held. Spectators entered in a processional ritual, in the ceremonial robes of academia, possibly accompanied by music.⁵⁸ The body, washed and shaven, was laid on a table on a central raised platform.⁵⁹ Once all members of the ceremony were seated, the anatomist would begin, entering the body through the abdomen. Most scholars attribute this traditional starting point to the simple fact that the abdominal organs were the first to decay, and thus it was the logical place to begin a multi-day proceeding.⁶⁰ However, it is important to note that classical thought, which heavily influenced medieval and early modern beliefs, considered the torso to be crucial in ordering the body and it was often seen as the house of the soul.⁶¹ In biblical times, the loins and bowels played a significant role in the affective makeup and expression of a being, unlike the modern period, which has witnessed the “gradual displacement [of sentience] upward” to the brain and the heart.⁶² For example, David Hillman notes that the phrase *me’ay hamu ‘alav* in the Song of Songs 5:4, which literally means “my entrails welled up for him,” is translated in the King James Bible of 1611 as “my bowels were moved for him,”⁶³ and by the contemporary New International Version more palatably as “my heart began to pound for him.”⁶⁴ For a society that considered human essence to be humoral—with psychological temperaments coursing through the passageways of the body—the abdominal organs also had special significance. Galenic medicine, based on the humors, described the liver as the source of desire, a concept that also frequently appears in Shakespeare, for example, when

⁵⁸ Klestinec 14.

⁵⁹ French 80.

⁶⁰ Hillman 17; French 43.

⁶¹ Hillman 15.

⁶² Hillman 16.

⁶³ Hillman 16.

⁶⁴ NIV, Songs 5:4.

Ferdinand in *The Tempest* refers to the “ardour of [his] liver.”⁶⁵ Shakespeare and his contemporaries were indeed more attuned to the passions that filled the viscera: he also speaks of “intestine joys,” a “fiery heart” and “bowels full of wrath.”⁶⁶ For female subjects there was particular significance to beginning the anatomy with the abdomen. The rare opportunity to dissect a female subject presented the chance to examine her essential differences from man. For many (male) anatomists, this was an enticing and logical place to begin their study. For example, Leonardo da Vinci, in his notes on his proposed book of anatomy, declares that “this work must begin with the conception of man, and describe the nature of the womb.”⁶⁷ Despite the rarity of female cadavers, the frontispiece of Vesalius’s seminal *De fabrica* features a female anatomy, her uterus exposed [See Figure 6]. Indeed, Vesalius explained that the woman depicted here was a criminal who had attempted to delay or avoid her execution by claiming to be pregnant; thus, the open, emptied womb serves not only as ocular proof of her lies,⁶⁸ but also strongly ties the ritualistic nature of the anatomical proceedings to other rituals and rites of passage that join together birth and death.⁶⁹

After the initial cross-shaped incision to expose the viscera, the anatomists then proceeded to reveal the organs, the nervous system, and the skeletal system, disposing of excess body matter in the omnipresent basket under the table, until the corpse was completely eviscerated. At the conclusion of the anatomy, the various pieces of the body were gathered up

⁶⁵ 4.1.61.

⁶⁶ *Richard III* 4.4.128; *Henry IV, Part II* 1.4.87; *King John* 2.1.216; Hillman 17.

⁶⁷ Park, *Secrets of Women* 35.

⁶⁸ Nunn 15.

⁶⁹ Victor Turner writes that symbols of birth and death are almost universally present in rites of passage (“Sacrifice as Quintessential Process,” 194). It is also worthy of note that in some ways, the open womb of Vesalius’ subject presents a far more intimate glimpse at a woman’s body than existed on the London stage—where male bodies mediated all knowledge of women’s interiority (Nunn 205).

and typically given Christian burial.⁷⁰ Particularly later in the period, students were often required to attend the burial and meditate upon its significance.⁷¹ Masses would be said for the soul of the dissected. In Rome, twenty Masses were ordered, which is significant compared to the requisite one for a criminal condemned to death but not to the dissection table, revealing an awareness about the degree to which the dissection act did indeed violate the body.⁷² This ritual “cleansing” process absolved social guilt and legitimized the practice from a religious perspective.

In a humor-driven culture, examining the interior of the body is also necessarily about examining the health of the psyche and the spirit.⁷³ As Sawday writes, “to peer into the body [...] became a voyage into the very heart of the principle of spiritual dissolution. Within this mental universe, illness and sickness, the malfunction of the body, was a profoundly important spiritual state [...].⁷⁴ King Lear epitomizes this when he declares that an anatomy of Regan will reveal “what breeds about her heart.”⁷⁵ Richard Sugg notes that in Shakespeare’s time, the expression “the eyes are the windows to the soul” was as literal as it was figurative; when Gertrude cries out to Hamlet that “forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep,” she believes she sees his agitated spirits literally threatening to escape his body.⁷⁶ Before more scientific investigations into the circulatory system, blood as well was intimately connected to spirit; Francis Bacon, for instance,

⁷⁰ Klestinec 125; Park, *Secrets of Women* 213. Park notes that before Italian confraternities such as the ones that performed anatomies were formed in the fourteenth century, the bodies of criminal were expelled from the community outside of the city walls to rot in the fields (*Secrets of Women* 213).

⁷¹ Klestinec 133.

⁷² Carlino 109.

⁷³ Even though the educated elite in the sixteenth century were beginning to recognize the brain as the site of mental activities as opposed to the heart, the humors were still regarded to have enormous impact on personality, mood and bodily disorders (Hillman 20).

⁷⁴ Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 21.

⁷⁵ 3.6.31.

⁷⁶ Sugg 175.

believed that the congealing of blood in a bruise was the congealing of spirits.⁷⁷ As a result, to an early modern audience, Faustus signing away his soul in blood literally meant releasing his soul in the very act.⁷⁸ The entrails in the early modern imagination were a “locus around which questions of subjectivity and otherness, as well as structures of belief and doubt, tend to cluster.”⁷⁹ Far more than today, in the early modern period we find everywhere an “interanimation of body and spirit.”⁸⁰ Existence meant being in one’s own *body*, not simply in one’s own mind. Therefore, as much as anatomical theatrical practices might have sought to anonymize the body into a nameless cadaver, cutting into the body in public dissection, as these literary examples help to demonstrate, was strongly connected with incising, and releasing, the soul.

Of course, any discussion of the interconnectedness of body and soul in this period must recognize that the nature of body and soul was also at the crux of the religious debates at the time. Catholicism is grounded in the ideas of God made flesh in Jesus Christ and the Eucharist made flesh through transubstantiation. The Reformation, however, inculcated “a distrust of externals [such as the Eucharist or saintly relics] and a corresponding turn away from the physical signs of inner conviction.”⁸¹ To Protestant Reformers, “Catholic preoccupation with the corporeal dangerously distorted the relationship between the body and soul by implying that the material body could have an independent or autonomous viability without benefit of informing spirit,” a conviction that the examples of the *virtus*-imbued relics in Chapter 1 demonstrate.⁸² As a result, the attempted clinicalization of the anatomical ritual in this period can be seen as

⁷⁷ Sugg 175.

⁷⁸ Sugg 174.

⁷⁹ Hillman 1.

⁸⁰ Hillman 2.

⁸¹ Hillman 38.

⁸² Zimmerman 8.

influenced by religious reform. As Susan Zimmerman puts it, “ultimately, the success of the effort by medical science to disempower the corpse as fetish, like that of religion to demystify the material idol, depended on establishing the dead body as detritus, devoid of informing spirit.”⁸³ Nevertheless, belief in restorative powers of the corpse persisted, even amongst non-Catholics. The Germanic principle of bier-right, or the belief that the body of a murder victim would bleed or otherwise manifest physical changes in the presence of its murderer, is a key illustration of this belief.⁸⁴ And the use of “mummy,” or medicine derived from human corpses, was perhaps appealing to Protestants precisely because it filled a void left by the symbolization of the Eucharist.⁸⁵

The significance of mummy in early modern society is worthy of further examination here in the context of the ritualistic import of the anatomical theatre. Most historical discussions of the anatomy conclude their descriptions of the rites with notes about the burial of the remains; rarely do these accounts address another possible fate for the body—a potentially lucrative one for the anatomist—that of mummy.⁸⁶ Mummy was a sought-after commodity in early modern Europe from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries.⁸⁷ It was originally derived from bodies disinterred from Egyptian tombs or buried and preserved in North African sandstorms, but as these ancient and exotic bodies became increasingly difficult to obtain, fresher and far more local

⁸³ 9.

⁸⁴ See Park, “The Life of the Corpse” 115-16.

⁸⁵ Noble argues that it is no surprise that Reformers who rejected the literal nature of the Eucharist found mummy particularly appealing as a corporeal food that satisfied a special hunger (3). Katherine Park also acknowledges that there are geographical considerations to be made here: Italians tended to see the “recently dead body as inert or inactive while [northern Europeans] treated it during this liminal period as active, sensitive, or semianimate, possessed of a gradually fading life” (Park, “The Life of the Corpse” 115).

⁸⁶ Ferrari does note that executed bodies were common sources of mummy: “What was sought after above all was the fat, but also blood, teeth, hair, burnt skull, the umbilicus, and other parts and substances of the body that possessed specific healing properties. Human fat, ‘purified and liquefied, like that of other animals,’ was generally extracted from the bodies of convicts by the executioner - sometimes as the last act of execution - purified, and then sold as a pain-killer” (Qtd. from G. Manara, *Notti malinconiche* (1668) in Ferrari 100-101).

⁸⁷ Noble 20.

corpses took their place, as Samuel Johnson tells us in his dictionary.⁸⁸ Powdered flesh from executed and unclaimed bodies was used to guard against bruising and bleeding or ingested for gout, fever, or diarrhea. Human fat was applied externally as ointment or plasters.⁸⁹ Ground-up skull was used in remedies for epilepsy and other ailments of the head, and a precise recipe of “blood, bones, and urine well rectified” was used to combat the plague.⁹⁰ Substances and materials taken from the live body, called “simples,” were also consumed for medicinal purposes, including hair, saliva, sweat, urine, kidney stones, and blood, which “drank recent and hot” was widely used as a treatment against epilepsy.⁹¹ While medicinal cannibalism was practiced in the Middle Ages, Sugg notes that it ironically became more popular amidst reports of New World cannibalism during the early modern period.⁹² The desire for mummy, particularly as it became acquired from the more recently departed, was motivated in part by beliefs in the “animate corpse” whose “biology potency smouldered on for months after death.”⁹³ Thus, mummy was imbued with an “uncanny temporal status,” reinvigorating past life in a new one.⁹⁴ The most highly prized mummy was that from a very fresh and healthy corpse, preferably a young man or virgin who had died a quick and violent death, for it was commonly believed that a swift death captured the body’s life force more surely than a slow one.⁹⁵ The body destined for the anatomical theatre often fit this bill—young, healthy, and of good musculature—and executed in what was most likely a state of considerable agitation.⁹⁶ While evidence of the remains of dissected bodies being used for mummy is admittedly scarce, in Ben Jonson’s

⁸⁸ Johnson, “Mummy.”

⁸⁹ Sugg 1; Ferarri 101.

⁹⁰ Qtd. from physician George Thomson (Sugg 14-15).

⁹¹ Noble 21.

⁹² Sugg 2.

⁹³ Sugg 2; 6.

⁹⁴ Noble 3.

⁹⁵ Sugg 3. Park amends this to note that Italian writers, unlike their Germanic counterparts, tended to believe real mummy had to come from embalmed and long-dead corpses (Park, “The Life of the Corpse” 116).

⁹⁶ Carlino 93.

Volpone, at least, the title character specifically refers to the human fat “which we buy of the anatomist” as a key ingredient in his miracle oil, and Samuel Johnson’s dictionary claims that druggists were well-supplied with the flesh of executed criminals.⁹⁷

Mummy also makes its appearance in numerous other Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. The witches in *Macbeth* include mummy in their brew.⁹⁸ In *Othello*, the handkerchief “dyed in mummy [...] conserved of maidens’ hearts” becomes the key mechanism for Iago to fuel Othello’s jealousy.⁹⁹ Sir Toby in *Twelfth Night* references both the humoral significance of the liver in producing the blood required for courage and jokingly threatens to ingest Sir Andrew if he loses his hypothetical wager: “For Andrew, if he were opened and you find so much blood in his liver as will clog the foot of a flea, I’ll eat the rest of th’anatomy.”¹⁰⁰ The prevalence of corpse medicine in the early modern period and Sir Toby’s hypothetical consumption of Sir Andrew’s *anima* along with his corporeal body brings new meaning to moments such as Hermione’s supposed revivification in *The Winter’s Tale* being a magic “as lawful as eating.”¹⁰¹ On the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, corpses are also metaphorically employed as psychological or political medicine. Desdemona’s body becomes “the ultimate corpse remedy” at the denouement of *Othello* as Othello indulges in a necrophilic speech over her sleeping body.¹⁰² He ingests Desdemona through the senses, taking in her “whiter skin [...] than snow,” her heat,

⁹⁷ Jonson 2.2; Johnson, “Mummy.”

⁹⁸ 4.1.23.

⁹⁹ 3.4.76-7. Noble also notes that when Othello cries “O blood, blood, blood!” at his first seizure, he is calling for more than revenge, he is calling for the elixir power of blood, which was believed to be a cure for epilepsy (137).

¹⁰⁰ 3.3.4-42.

¹⁰¹ 5.3.134.

¹⁰² Noble 139.

her rose-like smell,¹⁰³ the taste of her “balmy breath.”¹⁰⁴ And *Titus Andronicus* serves up human bodies as political stratagems at Saturninus’ table.¹⁰⁵

In his essay, “On Cannibals,” Montaigne compares the use of corpse medicine by Europeans to the cannibalism practiced by tribes in modern-day Brazil, where tribesmen ingested the bodies of rival tribe members, noting the hypocrisy in “physicians [who] do not fear to use human flesh in all sorts of ways for our health, applying it either inwardly or outwardly,” yet protest New World cannibalism.¹⁰⁶ Montaigne, while finding cannibalism abhorrent, finds it to be less so than European practices of torture:

I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine [...] (on the pretext of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead.¹⁰⁷

Montaigne also quotes a song by a defiant captured prisoner awaiting his fate as edible sacrifice, in which the prisoner taunts his captors to dine on him, for if they do so, they will be eating their fathers and grandfathers, who had fed and nourished his own body. “Savor them well,” he proclaims, “you will find in them the taste of your own flesh.”¹⁰⁸ This double standard, a sort of incestuous necrophagia, brings Montaigne, and us, back to the blind eye that Europeans turned to their own practices, feigning civility and scientific “progress” while remaining emotionally and somatically attached to the nourishing powers of ingested flesh.

The ritual of the anatomical theatre, the opening of the body, then, on some level seems to trigger a desire for more primal nourishment. All of the senses in this space are fully engaged

¹⁰³ Reminiscent of the odor of sanctity in saintly corpses.

¹⁰⁴ 5.2.4-16.

¹⁰⁵ The idea of unwittingly eating the remains of a relative is, of course, a recurring trope in revenge tragedies.

¹⁰⁶ 156.

¹⁰⁷ Montaigne 153.

¹⁰⁸ Montaigne 155.

in devouring, figuratively or literally, the anatomical subject. Ritual of any order necessarily engages the body and the soul of all of its participants. Its defining feature is its challenging of, and, in its highest form, its transcendence of self-differentiation. To understand this, it becomes necessary to reengage with the non-reified senses, dismissed by Descartes in the early seventeenth century as organs of primitive perception.¹⁰⁹ Early modern anatomical lectures are often described as primarily auditory events in which “the anatomist rather than the corpse dominated the setting. His words, not his hands were the keys to anatomical knowledge.”¹¹⁰ But in examining the engagement of the other senses, a fuller range of interactions in the anatomical theatres become apparent. Theatre identifies itself by the physical joining of actors and spectators within the same space, with all of their human and bodily attributes: no one could deny the putrefying smell of the rapidly decaying corpse in the anatomical theatre, for example.¹¹¹ Theatre, including the anatomical theatre, brings us tantalizingly close to the ability to touch the performers, and, occasionally, the ability to transcend this imaginary boundary. Perhaps more than the necessity of “seeing for oneself,” Vesalius emphasized the significance of *doing* for oneself, of touching the body with one’s own hands.¹¹² As mentioned earlier, civic officials in Bologna found it necessary to legally ban the audience from an apparently instinctual desire to touch and handle the organs of the anatomy. Vesalius, however, invited them to do so, at least in the case of his vivisections of animals, in which he allowed “those of the audience who [were] closest to the incision to put their hand on the transverse septum and feel its movement.”¹¹³

Samuel Pepys notes that after he attended an anatomy, he returned to see the body alone and “did

¹⁰⁹ See Descartes, *Descartes’ Meditations*, SM 32.

¹¹⁰ Klestinec 18.

¹¹¹ Simonds d’Ewes, a nobleman who attended a three-day anatomy lecture performed by William Harvey, found the proceedings to both “profit and delight, the smell excepted” (Qtd. in Nunn 9).

¹¹² In *De anatomicis administrandis* 1.3.231, as well, Galen explains that the student “must carefully do everything himself, even to removing the skin” (Qtd. in Klestinec 35).

¹¹³ Vesalius, Book VI, 271.

touch the dead body with my bare hand.”¹¹⁴ In visual iconography of dissection, it is common to portray the anatomist touching the body, probing into the body cavities.¹¹⁵ Vesalius’ author portrait, for example, portrays him touching the tendons of his anatomy’s flayed arm [See Figure 7]. And several of the most famous anatomical images of the early modern period depict moments of manual self-inspection. The anatomized body grasps the folds of his own incised abdomen, his fingers curling inside his own skin to reveal his entrails [See Figure 10]. Touch, as a pedagogical strategy was also valued by anatomists such as Vesalius who encouraged his students to touch the dog he vivisected and feel both the movement of its heart and its warmth.¹¹⁶ When his students asked him what he thought about these movements he replied, “you yourselves should feel with your own hands, and trust them.”¹¹⁷ Particularly as the anatomical theatre progressed, it is touch, rather than hearing or vision that was promoted as authority in this setting. And although there is little evidence for direct “tasting” of the anatomy in the anatomical theatre,¹¹⁸ a rather unpleasant thought, it is likely that audience members would have viewed the body, or parts of it anyway, as worthy of future ingestion in the form of corpse medicine. It is important to note, as well, that for many classical and medieval thinkers, taste was considered to be a special type of touch, and so taste too is tied to the desire to be physically connected, body-

¹¹⁴ Qtd. in Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 77-8.

¹¹⁵ For example, Vesalius’ author portrait in *De fabrica* (1543), Jacques De Gheyn II’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Pieter Pauw* (1615), and William Hogarth’s *The Reward of Cruelty* (1751). Or anatomies touching their own insides, as in Jacopo Berengario da Carpi’s “Anatomical View of Torso Muscles” in *Carpi commentaria* (1521) or Charles Estienne, *De Dissectione partium corporis* (1545).

¹¹⁶ Klestinec 37.

¹¹⁷ Qtd. in Klestinec 37.

¹¹⁸ Perhaps one of the closest examples we can find is the story of the Englishman Edward Browne who saw a man beheaded in Vienna in the winter of 1668-9. Browne reports that as soon as the man was executed, he saw “a man run speedily with a pot in his hand, and filling it with the blood, yet spouting out of his neck, he presently drank it off, and ran away” (Sugg 78).

to-body, with the corpse. Indeed, taste and touch together were considered by Aquinas to be the most “material” of the senses.¹¹⁹

Although the cannibalistic undertones of the anatomical theatre ritual might be muted, there nevertheless seems to be a sort of primal hunger lapping at the edges of the scene, itching fingers and waiting tongues in the galleries, that seem to point to a more deep-seated connection between the anatomical theatres and “primitive” sacrificial rituals than either early modern Europeans or many contemporary scholars might wish to address. William Robertson Smith, in his lectures on the Semites, characterizes the fundamental ritual of sacrifice as a meal of flesh and blood shared between men and gods as an act of communion,¹²⁰ a rite that has resonances in the Eucharist as well as on the anatomist’s table. Or as Baudrillard notes of societies that eat their own dead, “this devouring is a social act, a *symbolic act*, that aims to maintain a tissue of bonds with the dead man or the enemy they devour [...] it is always a mark of respect to devour somebody since, through this, the devoured even become sacred.”¹²¹ Baudrillard also provocatively postulates that this instinct towards necrophagia applies not just to “primitive” cultures, for even today “every man would like to devour his fellow man,” he writes. Our modern “civilized” inclinations towards cannibalism are merely suppressed by societal structures.¹²²

But early moderns also felt a strong compulsion to protect the body from such intimate union with other bodies. Because the human body was considered to be so integral to the spirit and yet so porous and vulnerable, we also see in this time period a proliferation of imagery that portrays the body as a castle or other structure under threat. There is a long tradition in the visual

¹¹⁹ Aquinas, *Sum I*, Q. 78, Art. 3.

¹²⁰ Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 31-2; W. Smith 264-265.

¹²¹ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 138.

¹²² *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 138.

representation of the body of depicting it as a fortress with doors and windows, entrances and portals for the admittance, or invasion, of external phenomena. Fletcher's anatomical fantasy poem, *The Purple Island*, is rife with descriptions of shields, walls, and moats.¹²³ Romeo articulates to the friar his own desire to "sack the hateful mansion" in his "vile [...] anatomy" that harbors his name and King Hamlet's ghost remembers the feel of the poison as it coursed through the "natural gates and alleys of the body."¹²⁴ The idea of the fortified body is also referenced repeatedly in *Coriolanus*, which configures the state as a metaphorical body, with its rulers at its abdomen (significantly, rather than the head).¹²⁵ Hillman sees in these patterns of imagery a reflection of an early modern desire to close the body's borders and raise its defenses against external stimuli. With William Harvey's announcement of his "discovery" of circulation in 1628, the increasingly bounded individual, the *homo clausus* as Norbert Elias terms it, found its physiological correlative.¹²⁶ The heyday of anatomical theatres, in terms of the broader trajectory of human existence, represented a moment of increasing desire to close off the body from its environment—a key transitional moment in the development of modern interiority.

The closed body, at its most extreme, becomes the prison of the soul. By the mid-seventeenth century, there seems to have been a shift in consideration of the interanimation of body and soul, perhaps very much influenced by the proceedings of the anatomical theatre and the corresponding scientific readings of the nature of body and soul it inspired. We find a different brand of metaphysics articulated in works such as Andrew Marvell's "Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body" (1650) in which the body and soul oppose each other in a battle for supremacy: the soul seeking liberation from "its bolts of bones" and "chains of nerves, and

¹²³ Fletcher.

¹²⁴ *Romeo and Juliet* 3.3.108-110; *Hamlet* 1.5.72.

¹²⁵ For example, when Coriolanus declares: "Even when the navel of the state was touch'd, they [the citizens] would not thread the gates" (3.1.147-8).

¹²⁶ Hillman 7.

arterie [sic], and veins” and the body seeking deliverance from a “tyrannic soul” that never allows it rest.¹²⁷ According to the soul, the body itself is the gibbets, suspending and torturing the soul.¹²⁸

It is touch, however, and by extension, other sensory engagements, that weakens the walls of this body fortress. Touch, in addition to being a valuable means of empirical understanding, was considered by early moderns to be singular amongst the senses for two reasons: first, because it was not localized to any one part of the body, but was co-extensive with the body’s surface; second, because “it was seen as fundamentally and inescapably reciprocal in that it involved a double sensation of touching and being touched.”¹²⁹ Or to put it more metaphysically, touch, writes Helkiah Crooke, stands “betwixt us and our dissolution.”¹³⁰ With its emphasis on sensory intimacy, the anatomical theatre also reveals its ritual impulses towards violence and dissolution of bodies and borders. Critics of the anatomical theatre frequently feared that the proceedings would devolve into a Saturnalian feast, characterized by lust, frenzy, and violence. Indeed, it sometimes did. For example, in Padua in 1589, two Sicilian attendees, described as “assassins” by a student who recounted the events, interrupted an anatomy and threatened the spectators, spurring officials to decide that some students should be better armed to defend them against violent adversaries.¹³¹ In 1595, several students from Jülich attempted to tear the doors of the Padua theatre off their hinges, upset that a cadaver from their region was being used for dissection.¹³² It is the same anxiety that guided the anti-theatricalists of the period

¹²⁷ Marvell.

¹²⁸ See also Hillman’s discussion of Marvell’s poem (21-23).

¹²⁹ Gallagher and Raman 20.

¹³⁰ Qtd. in Gallagher and Raman 65.

¹³¹ Klestinec 91.

¹³² Klestinec 136-137.

who feared the deeper sensations stirred up by theatre.¹³³ John Northbrooke opens his infamous 1577 treatise against dicing, dancing, and plays, *Spiritus est vicarius Christi in terra*, by citing St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, in which:

Saint Paul verie aptly (by a similitude) compareth the churche of Christ to a natural bodie. &c. As in the natural bodie euerie member helpeth the whole: for we see, that there is in a natural bodie such an affection and desire of euerie member to helpe and maintaine the other, that not only the senses be readie to do their part and office: as the eie to see, the eare to heare, the nose to smel, the tong to tast, &c. & so likewise in the rest of the senses: but also al the other parts of the bodie do so much care for the whole, that they refuse no danger (though it be neuer so great) to helpe and succour the same.¹³⁴

This invocation to Church authority establishes the vital need to guard the all-too-eager senses against the multisensory threat of the theatre and related entertainments, where:

filthie songs hurte thy chaste eares, and also shalt see that which shall be greeuous vnto thine eyes: for our eyes are as windowes of the mynde, as the Prophete sayeth: Death entred into my windowes, that is, by mine eyes.

This threat of invasion of the body fortress is universal, Northbrooke insists. Even if one does not believe oneself to be emotionally moved by the sights, once they hit the senses, they burn through the body—"a little sparkle of fire cast into strawe, beginneth quickly to kindle & flame, our fleshe is strawe, and will burne quickly[...]"—and the contagion spreads.¹³⁵ Or, as an early seventeenth century German anatomist had to warn his spectators, "in particular during the demonstrations of the female genitalia [...] contemplate everything with chaste eyes."¹³⁶ This very idea of "chaste eyes," or "chaste ears" as Northbrooke writes, suggests a more complicated intermingling of the senses with instincts and desires in the anatomical setting, just as much as in the dramatic theatre.

¹³³ Centuries later, Artaud confirms this sentiment when he declares, "Once launched upon the fury of his task, an actor requires infinitely more power to keep from committing a crime than a murderer needs courage to complete his act" (*The Theatre and Its Double* 25).

¹³⁴ Northbrooke.

¹³⁵ Northbrooke.

¹³⁶ Qtd. in Ferrari 99.

Northbrooke is right in believing, or fearing, that theatre is the means by which we engage in such sensory transformations. Although Victor Turner separates the ritual from the theatre because ritual makes no distinction between actors and spectators while theatre erects a proscenium that acts as gatekeeper much like the fortified borders of the body, it is my belief, as well as that of many other theatre scholars, that the distinction between ritual and theatre is not so simple.¹³⁷ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche traces the origin of Greek theatre, and thus all modern Western theatre, to the Dionysian ritual of dismemberment.¹³⁸ As Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, “in stark opposition to the Aristotelian concept of theatre which focused on mimesis, at the heart of Nietzsche’s concept is the performative act of transformation” which is only possible because of its origin in the sacrificial act.¹³⁹ The ritual of the early modern anatomical theatre is indeed a ritual of the Dionysian, not Aristotelian, order. The opening of the corpse, and its appeal to the senses, disturbs the boundaries of life and death, arousing the “mingled horror and fascination” we find in close contact with the corpse.¹⁴⁰ In the rituals of the anatomical theatre, we can see resonances of Bataille’s famous argument for religion as the “search for a lost intimacy,” a search for a return to immanence, partially, and only partially, recovered through the violence of the sacrifice.¹⁴¹ The ritual setting of the anatomical theatre brings our focus to the animate corpse, which is liminal and intermedial by its very nature, a body with both past life and present/future power. Applying Turner’s description of the rite of passage, during the transitional phase of the anatomy, the ritual subject (in this case the anatomized body) “pass[es] through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” before it is reincorporated into a

¹³⁷ *From Ritual to Theatre* 112.

¹³⁸ See Nietzsche 20-23.

¹³⁹ *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 39.

¹⁴⁰ Bataille, *Theory of Religion* 56.

¹⁴¹ Bataille, *Theory of Religion* 57.

“new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society”¹⁴² Although it may sound odd to speak of the decimated criminal corpse as being reincorporated into society as opposed to ostracized and abjected from it, the anatomical ritual bears these markers: the criminal body, which once would have been left to rot outside city walls is now bestowed with Christian burial, and if some of its remains are indeed collected as corpse medicine, then it is quite literally recirculated in society, a sacrificial meal to sustain the living. As Lucius says of the sacrifice of Tamora’s son Alarbus in the first scene of *Titus Andronicus*, the “entrails feed the sacrificing fire.”¹⁴³

In fact, using René Girard’s anthropological study of the universals of sacrifice, the criminal corpse might very well be the perfect sacrificial corpse because it both belongs to the community and exists outside of its social order.¹⁴⁴ As noted, in both England and Italy, public outcry and protests were likely if the anatomical subject was too much a part of the community.¹⁴⁵ But with the right amount of abject qualities, the corpse could be sacrificed yet still deemed worthy of sustenance for the community, “a monstrous double” that constitutes “both a link and a barrier between the community and the sacred.”¹⁴⁶

Although some might characterize the ritual of the anatomical theatres as a temporary disruption in social order, a Carnavalesque release that allows for the partial satisfaction of primal, transgressive urges,¹⁴⁷ it is my opinion that the bodily matter and affective energy released in the process cannot be fully contained. Theatre both controls and unleashes forces;

¹⁴² Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* 24.

¹⁴³ 1.1.144.

¹⁴⁴ Girard 271.

¹⁴⁵ As in the examples of the riotous Italian students mentioned earlier (Klestinec 136-7). Or in the riots against the surgeons at the Tyburn gallows (discussed further in Chapter 3), in which the London public fought back against the overzealousness of the surgeons in collecting bodies for dissection (See Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot Against the Surgeons”).

¹⁴⁶ Girard 271.

¹⁴⁷ See Bakhtin 10.

bodies are changed in their encounters with the sacred, and it would be naïve to assume that such a profound meeting could be contained in a secular ritual and forgotten once outside the theatre. Like the physicians, priest, and spectators who peered at and into the bodies of the conjoined twins, Joanna and Melchiora, we find the early modern anatomical theatre engaged in a type of haruspicy, a reading of the entrails, a divination of inner spirit and a grasping at the true nature of human interiority. The anatomical ritual cannot help but open the bodies of all its participants to a more intimate spiritual and physical union with the corpse-subject.

This union is accomplished through the all-important physical touch, body to body. I believe that what the anatomical theatre, in its intimate union of spectators and corpse, can teach us is to reconceive of all the senses as acting more in this way: taste as both ingesting the world and our own *anima*, sight as both being seen and seeing, smell as both inhaling scent and encountering it with our own breath. On the other hand, thoughts of boundaries indicate clear demarcations, portray the senses as all-too-literal windows and doors through which we process, or choose to exclude, phenomenological data.

The early modern anatomical theatres thus stage a crucial moment of ontological crisis. Crisis, a word that through the sixteenth century meant the turning point of a disease for better or for worse, is an appropriately rich term for a time in which the crisis of the development of interiority and self-differentiation was as corporeal as it was existential. Although the early modern period was moving towards a Cartesian or purely physiological understanding of the body, the sacred element of the anatomical theatres was not entirely lost. When Descartes in the early seventeenth century dismisses touch as a sense organ of primitive peoples,¹⁴⁸ perhaps it is at least partially because it is a sense that so palpably threatens the corporeal borders that protect the reified psyche. But in thinking of sensation in a broader sense or in Aristotle's notion of the

¹⁴⁸ Descartes, *Descartes' Meditations*, SM 23.

sensus communis, we stand a greater chance of being able to tap into the indescribable feeling of being in the presence of the opened body.¹⁴⁹ Being in this presence indeed necessitates opening ourselves. Cartesian thought, by finding the immaterial to be the solution to the perplexing metaphysical issues raised by the anatomical theatre, perhaps veils the primary issue that is at stake here: the ultimate unknowability of our own nature.

Perhaps, we can even go so far as to say that anatomies were integral to the very development of Cartesianism, an entrenched tradition instituted by a philosopher who needed to raise the walls of the body-fortress in order to understand his interiority, and, who, in doing so sets aside a key aspect of himself: bodily knowledge, which only recently has seen a resurgence in phenomenology and affect studies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹⁵⁰ In fact, it is perhaps precisely because of the tight authoritative control leveraged over the anatomical theatres that the rite is never fully satisfying. In many ways, the anatomical theatre, and theatre at large, seems to simply toy with the *limen*, merely flirt with immanence. As horrifying it might seem, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that some anatomists were rumored to have turned to human vivisection to enhance their understanding, possibly for more reasons than to better understand living tissues and organs.¹⁵¹ The inanimate corpse only has so much life to give.¹⁵² There are limits to the “knowing” of anatomy; peering into the abyss of the abdominal cavity like *Macbeth*’s witches into their brew often unearths more questions than answers. The body reminds us that, although we may have consciously moved the source of our emotional and sensory drives to the electrical impulses of our brain, in moments of crisis, we return deep inside

¹⁴⁹ See Serres, *The Five Senses*.

¹⁵⁰ See Descartes, *Descartes’ Meditations*, SM.

¹⁵¹ K. Park, “Criminal and Saintly Body” 4, 15.

¹⁵² In fact, one of the primary reasons dissections were not carried out in the classical period was because of the influence of the Empiricists, who argued that the moment life leaves the body, the body is forever changed and thus dissection served no medical purpose—for studying the corpse would never truly reveal the functions of the live body (French 19).

our bodies. We feel anxiety in the pit of our stomachs; heartaches just as physically as metaphorically. And this is arguably why the very visceral language of Shakespeare still resonates so strongly with contemporary readers. Theatre, including the anatomical theatre, calls us into its experience, yet asks us to step back to observe its microcosmic world as an omnipotent observer. But the (anatomical) theatre, as Antonin Artaud puts it, like the plague, is contagious, “the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or people, are localized.”¹⁵³ The opening of the body in the anatomical theatre, then, acts as a portal to immanence, which Deleuze defines simply as “a life, and nothing else.”¹⁵⁴ In the anatomical theatre, it is a life that does not stop performing in death, but is unleashed in the very act.

¹⁵³ Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* 30.

¹⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Pure Immanence* 27.

Figure 6: The frontispiece of *De humani corporis fabrica* by Andreas Vesalius (1543).

Figure 7: Author portrait of Andreas Vesalius from *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543).

Figure 8: Dissected human body from *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543).



Figure 9: *Anatomia del corpo humano* by Juan Valverde de Amusco (1559).

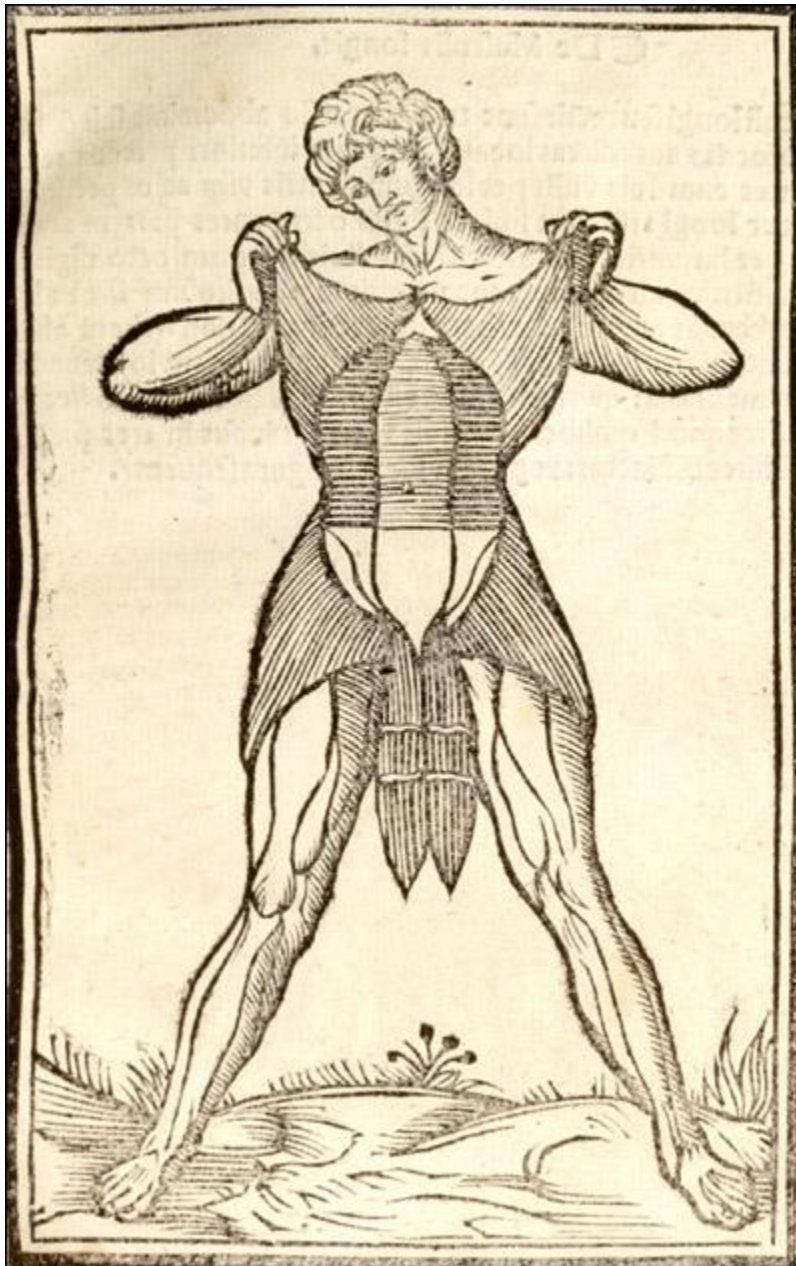


Figure 10: Image of torso muscles from *Anatomia Carpi* by Jacopo Berengario da Carpi (1535).



Figure 11: Frontispiece from John Banister's Anatomical Tables c. 1580. Image courtesy of the University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections. Note: the inscriptions Kate Cregan speaks of do not appear on this version.

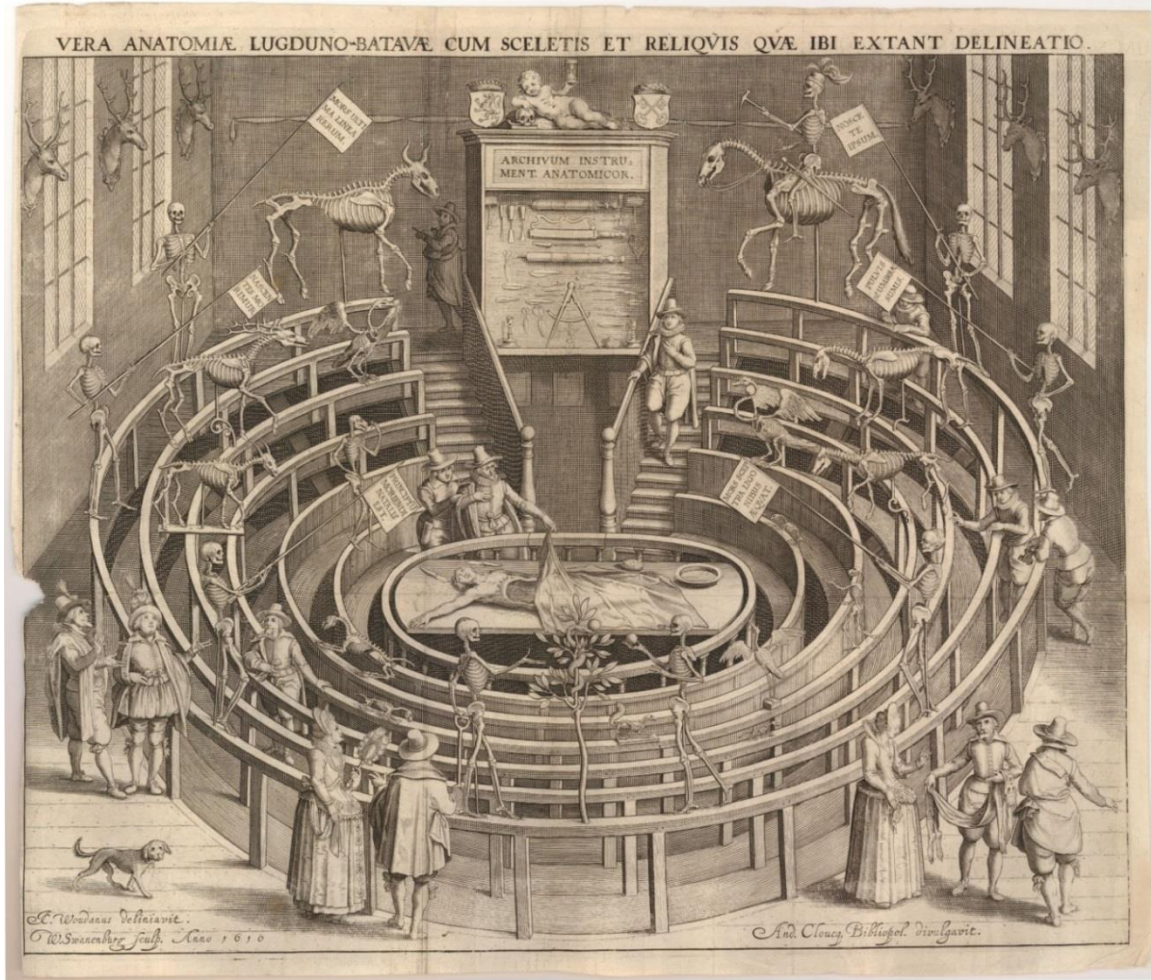


Figure 12: The anatomical theatre at Leiden. Etching by Jan Cornelis Woudanus. Print by Willem van Swanenburg (1610). Image courtesy of The British Museum.

CHAPTER 3

“They Carry Our Bodies Away”: Presenting Anatomical Lust and the Absent Corpse in Edward

Ravenscroft’s *The Anatomist*

In early September of 2007, Carlos Camejo, a 33-year-old Venezuelan man riding a motorcycle was killed in a head-on collision with an oncoming truck. While his injured passenger looked on, he was robbed of his valuables by first responders and his body was delivered to the local hospital. The following day, medical examiners began an autopsy on Camejo. After an initial cut into his face released a stream of fresh blood, the startled examiners began stitching up the incision immediately, and Camejo’s once-dead eyes fluttered open. “I woke up because the pain was unbearable,” Camejo told his local newspaper.¹ When his wife later arrived to identify the body, she found him waiting for her in a hospital hallway.² The United States, one of the most medically-advanced countries in the world, also has its share of recent sudden resurrections in the morgue. In 2005, a 29-year-old North Carolinian man, Larry Green, was declared dead also following a car accident and sent to the county morgue. When the coroner unzipped the bag two hours later, Green was discovered to be breathing.³ In February of 2014, an elderly Mississippi man also woke up inside his body bag at a funeral home.⁴ While such spontaneous “resurrections” are relatively rare in developed countries, these spectacular revivifications have a long history of capturing the public imagination. Stories of premature burials discovered by unwitting grave robbers in the nick of time and scratch marks on the insides of coffin lids discovered all too late were perennially resurrected in folktales and street

¹ “*Venezolano que daban por muerto.*”

² “‘Dead’ Man Wakes Up.”

³ “Man Declared Dead Turns out to Be Alive.”

⁴ Moisse.

pamphlets from the medieval period through the nineteenth century. During times in which the plague and other devastating diseases such as cholera or smallpox prompted hurried declarations of death and swift burials, stories of premature interments and “resurrections” are even more common. And during the height of the public anatomical theatres from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, when the freshness of the dissected body was paramount to its scientific value, stories of hanged victims regaining consciousness on the dissection table were also a common fixture in popular culture.⁵

One of the most famous tales in mid-seventeenth century England was the “miraculous deliverance of Anne Greene,” a household maid who was hung for murder in December 1650 in Oxford.⁶ As a servant in the household of Sir Thomas Read in Oxfordshire, Greene became pregnant with the child of Jeffrey Read, the grandson of Sir Thomas. When the infant’s body was discovered in the privy, Greene was accused of murder and immediately sent to jail and condemned to death by hanging three weeks later. She was hung on the gallows for half an hour while her friends pounded on her chest, hung their full weight upon her legs, and jerked her up and down to hasten her expiration, until the undersheriff forbade them from continuing to do so for fear they would break the rope. After it was determined that she was sufficiently dead, Anne was placed in a coffin to be delivered to the private house of Dr. William Petty, the reader in anatomy at Oxford, to be dissected for the edification of the students. When the coffin was opened en route, she was discovered to still be breathing, and a passerby stomped on her breast and stomach to dispatch her of her pain. Still, she clung to life. When the anatomists arrived and noticed she was stirring, they determined to revive her instead, giving her hot cordials and warming and stimulating her extremities. Within a week she was answering questions

⁵ See Linebaugh, “Tyburn Riot” 115.

⁶ See “Newes from the Dead,” a pamphlet written in 1651 by an Oxford scholar detailing the circumstances of the case.

intelligibly, and within a month she was fully recovered, minus a brief period of amnesia surrounding the execution itself. In the same room where her body had been destined for dissection, she was put on display for the multitudes that flocked there each day to admire the wonder of her life and who gladly paid the probable admissions fee.⁷ Her tale was immortalized in the over fifty poems composed by Oxford students after the event, commemorating her purity and her innocence, applauding the physicians who revived her, and condemning the hangman. Given the improbable circumstances of her resurrection, which was deemed to indicate divine intervention, Greene was pardoned of all charges, and the matter was ruled an accident: her child either must have been stillborn or “fell from her unawares” while she was in the privy.⁸

A resurrection tale such as Greene’s performatively reconstructed her life. In posterity, she became a theatrical object, brought to life not only by the physicians who physically revived her, but by their students who rewrote and re-membered her social role. Her once-criminalized body was reborn as pure, virginal, almost divine; her innocence revised to the point where she may never have even noticed her pregnancy and delivery. And as a staged object to be contemplated by the hordes of curious onlookers who paraded through her chambers, she redefined the possibilities of life and complicated the certainties of death. Stories such as Anne Greene’s have subversive power—to undermine not only judicial and social authority, but also ontological certainty. As anatomico-medical authority increased its reach in the seventeenth century, the performative body of the “resurrected” corpse challenged this by complicating the biological and psychological signifiers of life and death. While popular culture shared miraculous tales of resurrections and premature burials, on stage, the popular seventeenth century farce *The Anatomist, or the Sham Doctor* by Edward Ravenscroft explored the theatrical

⁷ T. Hughes 1793.

⁸ “Newes from the Dead.”

potentials of the tenuous line between life and death. In this play, characters masquerade as corpses destined for dissection in order to evade their own unmasking, and in doing so, the play both legitimizes public fear of the overreaching lust of anatomists and calls into question existing boundaries between life and death. In this play, the performative corpse is perhaps at its most literal instantiation, as the play's characters (and by extension, the audience) put themselves in the position of the corpse and feel with their living bodies the injustices that might be enacted on them in death. But what ultimately becomes apparent to us, as readers of this moment, is that *playing* dead is not *being* dead, and the specter of death becomes all the more hauntingly elusive.

The plot of *The Anatomist*, first performed in 1696 and staged regularly until the late eighteenth century, features a routine love triangle between a beautiful young girl, Angelica; her handsome suitor, Young Gerald; and his amorous father, Old Gerald, who wants to buy Angelica's hand for himself. Angelica's father, the Doctor, agrees to Old Gerald's proposal, but cannot obtain the consent of his wife, who conspires with her daughter to advocate on behalf of Young Gerald. The real attractions of the play, however, are the antics of Young Gerald's servant, Crispin, and the Doctor's servant, Beatrice. In an effort to conceal Crispin's courtship visit to her, Beatrice tells him to lie on the Doctor's dissection table and pretend to be the corpse that was supposed to be delivered from the gallows that day for a dissection. This marks the first of two scenes in the farce in which characters "play dead." The Doctor sends Beatrice to retrieve his dissecting tools, and to the audience's delight, describes in detail the mutilations he will enact upon the undoubtedly squirming Crispin. In an effort to delay the Doctor, Beatrice hides his tools rather than retrieves them and succeeds in ushering the Doctor away to visit his patients. Later in this play, Crispin's discomfort over this situation becomes the seed of a scheme to trick Old Gerald. Beatrice coquettishly invites the old man to a tryst with Angelica in the dissection room,

where Angelica subsequently instructs Old Gerald to pretend to be the corpse himself when it appears that they will be discovered. Crispin enters dressed as a doctor and comically recites his own butchered rendition of the Doctor's dissection plans, culminating in a declaration that he will cut open "de Breast-bone, from de Ribs, and lay all open"⁹ as he slices Old Gerald's waistcoat from top to bottom in a mock incision of the torso before the old man leaps from the table and races from the room. During this commotion, Angelica and Young Gerald sneak off to her chambers to have their marriage "confirm'd in private," and all ultimately ends happily for the couple and for "Doctor" Crispin.¹⁰

The Anatomist was the last comic piece produced by Ravenscroft in his career. Though it is now considered to be a rather minor play, it was extremely successful from its first appearance and remained in regular repertoire at both Lincoln Inn's Field and Drury Lane for decades.¹¹ The characters and plot are largely derived from the French play *Crispin médecin* by Noel Le Breton Hauteroche, but the most significant revisions are made to the scenes involving the pretended cadavers. The second scene in which Old Gerard is forced to play the dead body while Crispin brandishes his butchering tools, significantly, is Ravenscroft's own invention and perhaps speaks to particular social anxieties in England at the time concerning anatomical abuses, particularly as they were leveraged against the poor and working class.¹² This comedic trope of having actors pose as inanimate figures is borrowed from the *commedia dell'arte*,¹³ but it is a shtick that has particularly rich resonances in a play that theatrically foregrounds the complex status of the corpse as both subject and object, present and absent, and animate and inanimate.

⁹ Ravenscroft.

¹⁰ Ravenscroft.

¹¹ The original version included musical inserts composed by Peter Anthony Motteux on the theme of Mars and Venus. In the eighteenth century, these musical scenes were dropped and *The Anatomist* lived on as a popular afterpiece until the end of the century (L. Hughes 241).

¹² L. Hughes 35.

¹³ L. Hughes 40.

As a farce, a relatively new genre for the Restoration stage, *The Anatomist* also has fertile potential for the subversion of social structures. Farce was generally dismissed as a low-brow theatrical genre in late seventeenth century England; even its own playwrights were reluctant to defend the art form. It was seen primarily as a means of pleasing a popular audience, a surefire way to generate funds in the pocketbook. In the preface to his second edition of *A Duke and No Duke* (1693), however, Nahum Tate defends farce on the grounds that while comedy imitates human nature, farce extends beyond the artifice of “Nature and Probability”¹⁴ and unearths the undercurrents of human instinct and behavior in the tradition of Aristophanes. Farce, like the grotesque, is connected to the “material and bodily roots of the world,” to use Bakhtin’s terms, and has a “deeply cosmic” character that is “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits.”¹⁵ Samuel Pepys found farces to be concerning precisely because he enjoyed them so much: they inspired an “unnerving and uncontrollable breakdown in the boundaries of socially approved behavior” in the form of uproarious laughter.¹⁶ Here, one might be reminded of the transgressions of the anatomical theatres, in which the opening of the corpse seemed to unleash rather Bacchanalian urges in the audience as well. Farce, likewise, touches its spectators on the inside, appealing to base, primal urges and needs. In choosing to go where “refined” drama would not, farce is able to make use of the elements that are otherwise abjected in polite society: bodily functions, monstrosity, the inhuman. In addition to putting an emphasis on the body through comedy, *The Anatomist* also offers a rather stringent critique of anatomical practices in England and Europe at large. And a “popular” audiences that included a significant number of members from the lower classes would assuredly be more sympathetic to the play’s criticisms of the anatomists who sought the bodies of their own.

¹⁴ Holland 108; Tate.

¹⁵ Bakhtin 19, 26.

¹⁶ Holland 112.

Dissection in late seventeenth century England, perhaps even more so than in the early years of the anatomical theatres, was considered to be a punishment worse than death: a means of dismembering the soul as well as the body. In London, criminals condemned to dissection were retrieved from the gallows immediately after they were presumed dead, their clothing (often their most valuable property) was turned over to the hangman, and their bodies were carried to the hall of either the Worshipful Company of Barber-Surgeons or the College of Physicians. When the audience assembled in the anatomical theatre of the Barber-Surgeons, the body would be systematically dissected over the course of three days with six different anatomical lectures illustrating the functions of various systems in an order that best accommodated the body's rapid decomposition.¹⁷ The London public was well-familiar with this ritualized punishment. The gallows at Tyburn were famous for drawing large crowds of citizens to watch criminals hang; public executions in London weren't entirely removed from public view until 1868.¹⁸ Many of the same citizens who formed the audience at Tyburn would likely have sat in the theatre for Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist* as well.¹⁹ Following their dissections, the cadavers' skeletons would sometimes be cleaned for display, as was the fate of Canonbury Bess and Country Tom, who were executed for robbery and murder in 1635 and displayed in the Barber-Surgeon's Anatomy Theatre, a fact that would have been common knowledge for much of Ravenscroft's audience.²⁰ Later, William Hogarth's famous four-part series *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751) would depict a horrifying dissection scene as the last stage of existence for those who followed an evil path. In this engraving, Hogarth's subject, Tom Nero, with the hangman's rope still around his neck and his seemingly-awake face contorted in pain, is

¹⁷ Cregan, *Theatre of the Body* 14.

¹⁸ Cregan, "Edward Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist*" 25.

¹⁹ Cregan, "Edward Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist*" 26.

²⁰ Remains not preserved for display were buried in the nearby churchyard of St. Olaves Silver Street (Cregan, *Theatre of the Body* 14).

vigorously drawn apart by the surgeons while the physicians look on dispassionately, his intestines spilling out onto the ground and a dog gnawing on his heart [See Figure 14]. This final piece, *Reward of Cruelty*, was intended to strike fear into the hearts of the lower classes, and while it obviously exaggerates the scene of the anatomical theatre, it nevertheless reflects popular public opinion of the time concerning the horrific punitive nature of anatomy, even before the Murder Act of 1751 mandated dissection as a punishment for murder.²¹

Since the founding of the Worshipful Company of Barber-Surgeons in 1540, the company had been granted four bodies a year from the gallows at Tyburn for anatomical lectures for apprentices and Company members. In 1565, the College of Physicians was granted the same allowance. For over a century, these two organizations held a virtual monopoly on bodies from Tyburn and were relatively unchallenged in their collection of them. However, as medical advancements fueled competition between England's anatomists for new discoveries in the human body, private hospitals and universities also jostled for bodily matter from Tyburn.²² If cadavers couldn't be obtained for medical students, anatomical institutions risked losing them to the schools of Paris, where the unclaimed bodies of the poor were already being allocated for dissection.²³ Consequently, bodysnatching and grave robbing became viable and potentially lucrative professions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and a real threat to the dead body.²⁴ Peter Linebaugh argues that the development of both a public and underground trade in cadavers facilitated an important shift in societal attitudes towards the dead body: "The corpse [became] a commodity with all the attributes of a property. It could be owned privately. It

²¹ Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* 35.

²² Linebaugh, "The Tyburn Riot" 73.

²³ Roach 42.

²⁴ Linebaugh, "The Tyburn Riot" 72. In the United States, public outrage at body snatching and dissection spurred a series of riots against medical colleges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Greater public distaste for anatomies in the U.S. resulted in museums of anatomic specimens and waxwork models largely being used to satisfy curiosity in anatomy instead of public dissections (Ross 66).

could be bought and sold. A value not measured by the grace of heaven nor the fires of hell but quantifiably expressed in the magic of the price list was placed upon the corpse.”²⁵

On the stage, several playwrights of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mocked or condemned the anatomists as lustful, cruel, and heartless.²⁶ This, of course, was passed down in a theatrical tradition from Greek and Roman comedy, and through Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, that portrayed the doctor as “quack” or highlighted the similarities between the deceptive practices of the physician and the performer.²⁷ Growing distrust of anatomists, however, led them to be increasingly portrayed as villains and murderers themselves, as is evidenced in works such as *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) by John Gay, in which members of Macheath’s gang lament the fate of “Poor Brother Tom” who “had an Accident this time Twelvemonth” and could not be saved “from those fleaing Rascals the Surgeons; and now poor Man, he is among the Ottamys at Surgeons Hall.”²⁸ Saving one’s own body from the anatomists became a legitimate concern for the London poor. Felons awaiting their execution pleaded with family, friends, and fellow workers to claim their bodies from the gallows before the surgeons took their chance.²⁹ A working-class drinking song of the early eighteenth century poignantly conveys this concern:

But if our Friends will stand by us;
Six and Eight-pence for us to pay;
He [the anatomist] takes his Cheve and cheves us down,
And they carry our Bodies away.³⁰

²⁵ Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot” 72.

²⁶ The apparent rapacity of anatomists also led to the emergence of a movement that sought to counter the necessity of anatomization and protect the body from such injustice. Whereas Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Da Vinci had deemed dissection to be an integral part of their study, many art instructors of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were promoting classical sculpture or the art of recent masters as the only models necessary for their students (Goeller 278; Cazort 22-23). A propagandic engraving by Carlo Maratta at the end of the seventeenth century clearly conveys this argument, depicting students working amidst plaster casts of the human body, rather than cadavers or skeletons, with *Tanto che basti* (“That’s all you need”) written below the picture (Cazort 22-23).

²⁷ See Pollard 33-34.

²⁸ Gay 2.1.2.

²⁹ Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot” 79.

³⁰ Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot” 81-82.

In addition to the ability to pay, the anatomists had legal authority on their side against the poor. Linebaugh reports that rescuing the corpse of a friend from the gallows was a dangerous undertaking in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and numerous individuals were imprisoned or executed themselves for attempting to do so.³¹ In 1725, Bernard Mandeville described a riot at Tyburn in terms of a theatricalized battle between the public and the surgeons over the possession of the corpses, with the “Rabble” crying “They have suffer’d the Law [...] and shall have no other barbarities put upon them: We know what you are and will not leave before we see them buried.”³² A number of other clashes between the poor and the surgeons were reported at Tyburn in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, subdued only by the authorities’ denial of the surgeons’ and physicians’ requests to claim bodies whenever tensions grew too heated.³³ Finally, in 1752, Parliament passed the Murder Act, which declared that “in no case whatsoever shall the body of any murderer be suffered to be buried” and mandated public dissection or hanging in chains for convicted murderers.³⁴ This act not only solidified in writing the punitive nature of dissection that was already evident in public opinion, but also helped alleviate grave robbing and bodysnatching by increasing the availability of bodies for the anatomists, although it did not entirely stop these practices by any means.³⁵ It took the Second Anatomy Act of 1832 to fully subdue it, which followed the particularly lurid trial of body snatcher William Burke, who, along with his partner William Hare, turned to murder in order to procure fresher corpses. However, the criminal element of dissection never disappeared. The Second Anatomy Act, which released the unclaimed bodies of the poor to the anatomists, as

³¹ Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot” 82.

³² Mandeville. Mandeville describes the riot in theatrical terms: the battle between surgeons and the public over the corpses is depicted as an afterpiece to the tragic play of life culminating in the death of its protagonist. The entertainment embedded such an instance is melded with the diversions of the stage. The accusation “We know what you are,” as opposed to “who you are,” however, turns the tables of theatrical objectification on the surgeons.

³³ Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot” 101.

³⁴ *Collection of Statutes*.

³⁵ See Cregan, *The Theatre of the Body* 13.

Ruth Richardson persuasively argues in *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, effectively made poverty itself a crime.³⁶

The anatomist, whether barber-surgeon or physician, thus maintained not only medical and scientific authority over the corpse in the period of *The Anatomist*, but also ontological authority. When dissection came to be viewed as form of punishment more terrifying than death itself, it allowed the anatomist's control to extend even to the identity of the subject, as

Richardson notes:

It was popularly understood that the surgeons' official function and interest in a murderer's corpse was...to destroy it. Dissection was a very *final* process. It denied hope of survival—even the survival of identity after death...doctors [murdered] more surely than the hangman's rope.³⁷

Anatomico-medical authority increasingly sought to justify the treatment of marginalized individuals as experimental flesh. The popular “sciences” of metoposcopy and physiognomy in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought to find the relationships between moral and social character and anatomy. When *The Anatomist's* doctor approaches his supposed corpse, Crispin, he comments, “He is not ill shap'd, nor is he very ill featur'd; and yet his visage still retains much discontent and trouble. Well, all the Rules of Metoposcopy and Physiognomy are false, if this was not a Rogue that very well deserv'd hanging.”³⁸ In metoposcopically reading the wrinkles of Crispin's face, the Doctor associates his bodily appearance with criminality; his corporeality and class identity is enough to justify his punishment. In other moments in the play,

³⁶ Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*. William Hare was granted immunity for testifying against Burke. After Burke's conviction, a crowd of more than 2,500 watched him hang and his body, appropriately, was consigned to the anatomists. The day after the dissection, the anatomy room was opened to approximately 30,000 citizens who filed in to see his dismembered corpse (Roach 51). Christine Quigley also writes that, with the passage of the Second Anatomy Act, the poor justifiably feared that they would not receive proper care in the case of illness or injury. Occasionally, authorities would even deny the requests of the friends and family of the poor who attempted to claim their bodies and instead would bequeath them to hospitals for dissection (*Dissection on Display* 46-47).

³⁷ Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* 76.

³⁸ Ravenscroft.

Crispin expresses his anxiety over anatomy's targeting of the lower classes, exclaiming after he escapes the Doctor's designs on his body: "I had rather be a Sot than an Anatomy, I will not have my Flesh scrap'd from my Bones. I will not be hung up for a Skeleton in Barber-Surgeons-Hall."³⁹ Although Peter Holland argues that this farcical trope of "uneducated men playing at doctors suggests the 'performability of social behaviors' but still does so conservatively,"⁴⁰ I would argue that Crispin's assumption of the role of doctor has much more potent effects. Indeed, there are limits to the genre, and the closure of the play suggests that no justice will be done to the doctor. Nevertheless, the play is stringent in its criticism, implying that unwarranted and premature dissection is a danger that could potentially affect anyone. "There are as many great Physitians, as great Fools as my self," Crispin warns, and the climactic scene in which Old Gerald, the play's symbol of wealth and power, is laid upon the table, renders it apparent that Old Gerald has just as much to fear from premature vivisection as Crispin does.⁴¹ When the epilogue of the play uses the language of anatomy to deliver the customary theatrical appeal for mercy, pleading: "save the Body of our Play,/ From those who to dissect it Yonder stay,/ Like Surgeons on an Execution day./ Ev'n e're it dyes they'll mawl it, I m afraid," the point is driven home that it is the surgeons who are the predators waiting in the wings.⁴²

Because the play stages a private anatomy in a theatrical space, thus mimicking a public anatomy, it is able to exploit the potentials of both the public and the private anatomy. Thus, in the festive atmosphere of a London playhouse, the play was likely able to invoke both the "street-theater-cum-abattoir air of the proceedings [of the public anatomy lecture]" that so

³⁹ Ravenscroft.

⁴⁰ Holland 109.

⁴¹ Ravenscroft.

⁴² Ravenscroft.

“smacked of disrespect,”⁴³ as well as the horrors that might be enacted on the body when anatomists were not concerned about being publically judged for their “performances.” Private anatomies were in many ways more worrisome to the populace because no one could be precisely sure what injustices were being enacted upon the body behind closed doors. Vesalius, along with many other early anatomists, was known to perform private dissections to which authorities often turned a blind eye.⁴⁴ Private dissections by doctors for small groups of students and physicians became even more widespread as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progressed.⁴⁵ The Doctor in *The Anatomist* is quite conscious of growing public discontent with the work of the anatomists. He chooses the back apartment at the end of his garden for his demonstration rather than the Great Hall, the previous site of his dissections, explaining that this is so that “the body may be brought in privately” and so that the “self-conceited, obstinate Physicians” who “will maintain their notions with more noise, than Betters in a Cock-pit” will not disturb the neighborhood.⁴⁶ In moving the dissection to a secret room in back of the house, the Doctor carefully removes it from the prying—and potentially disapproving—eyes of casual onlookers and also attempts to contain the rowdy physicians, whose arousal by the dissection (and their own opinions) exceeds propriety.

An early nineteenth century satirical poem by Robert Southey, although not immediately contemporaneous with *The Anatomist*, helps to vividly portray public sentiment towards the anatomist over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This poem, entitled “Surgeon’s Warning,” is written from the point of view of an ignominious surgeon, who has no qualms about the candles he has made from “infants fat [sic]” or the hearts and livers he has pilfered

⁴³ Roach 47.

⁴⁴ Carlino 19.

⁴⁵ Roach 40-43.

⁴⁶ Ravenscroft.

from graves. On his deathbed, however, he dreads his own dissection at the hands of his apprentices, who gather like vultures at his bedside, pleading with them:

All kinds of carcasses I have cut up,
And the judgment now must be—
But brothers I took care of you,
So pray take care of me!

The surgeon dictates an extensive list of protections for his remains, including being interred in a lead coffin behind a locked door with three armed sentries to keep watch at night, and, at first, his apprentices reluctantly obey his commands. But their fingers grow restless, and they eventually “burst the patent coffin,” “cut thro’ the lead,” and carry the surgeon home in a sack to “[carve] him bone from bone.”⁴⁷

It was widely feared that the unquenchable lust of anatomists such as the ones depicted in Southey’s poem might lead them to vivisection. Although the story was eventually discredited in the twentieth century, it was long believed that Andreas Vesalius was pressured by the Inquisition to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land as a punishment for performing an autopsy on a Spanish aristocrat while his heart was still beating.⁴⁸ Indeed, it seems apparent from seventeenth and eighteenth century documents that the question of whether or not to dissect a body discovered to be alive was actually a matter of some debate in the time. The *Newgate Calendar*, for example, quotes an eighteenth century surgeon who justified premature dissections on the grounds of public safety:

⁴⁷ Southey.

⁴⁸ A pilgrimage on which Vesalius eventually died. Jacques-Bénigne Winslow records the incident in *The Uncertainty of the Signs of Death and the Danger of Precipitate Internments and Dissections* (1748): “Andrea Vesalius, successively first Physician to Charles the Fifth, and his Son Philip the Second of Spain, being persuaded that a certain Spanish Gentleman, whom he had under his Management, was dead, ask’d Liberty of his Friends to lay his Body open. But his Request being granted, he had no sooner plung’d his Dissecting-Knife in the Body, than he observed the Signs of Life in it; nor could he be mistaken in this Conjecture, since upon opening the Breast, he saw the Heart palpitating. The Friends of the Deceas’d, prompted by the Horror of the Accident, not only pursued Vesalius as a Murderer, but also accus’d him of Impiety before the Inquisition” (100-101).

I am pretty certain, gentlemen, from the warmth of the subject and the flexibility of limbs, that by a proper degree of attention and care the vital heat would return, and life in consequence take place [...] [but] should we restore him to life, he would probably kill somebody else. I say, gentlemen, all these things considered, it is my opinion that we had better proceed in the dissection.⁴⁹

By contrast, in *The Uncertainty of the Signs of Death, And the Dangers of Precipitate Internments and Dissections* (1748), Jacques-Bénigne Winslow writes that the physician Riolanus argued that the dead body should be treated with more compassion:

so long as the Body [destined for dissection] is warm, and the person but lately executed, we are not to dissect him; since if there is still any Prospect of recalling him to Life, we are equally bound by the Principles of Humanity and Charity to do all we can for that Purpose, in order to procure him, if possible, a favourable Opportunity of Repentance.⁵⁰

The Doctor in *The Anatomist*, however, clearly falls into the first camp concerning vivisection. His desire to demonstrate his medical prowess outweighs any compassion for the body before him. Upon approaching Crispin-the-corpse for the first time, the Doctor notes that he feels “his Heart pant yet: If any of my fellow Physicians were here now, especially those who doubt the Harveyan Doctrine, I’d let ‘em plainly see the Circulation of the Blood thro the Systole and Diastole,” something that, of course, could only be demonstrated on a live body.⁵¹ Crispin’s comment that “a Physitian cuts up a man with as little remorse, as a Hangman carves a Traytor” also alludes to a suspicion that anatomists had their hands in murder.⁵²

When the Doctor notices that the body is still warm, he cannot be dissuaded from immediate dissection despite Beatrice’s protests that his patients need him and that he must wait for his audience:

⁴⁹ Harris.

⁵⁰ 28-9.

⁵¹ Ravenscroft.

⁵² Ravenscroft. Crispin’s comment echoes Mosca and Corbaccio’s conversation in Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* when Mosca claims “[the anatomists] flay a man/ Before they kill him” and Corbaccio agrees, “It is true, they kill/ With as much license as a judge” (1.4.27-8; 1.4.32-3).

Beatrice: But Sir, your Patients expect you now.
 Doctor: An hour or two hence will serve.
 Beatrice: Should any of 'em dye in the mean time?
 Doctor: That's not my fault; if any of 'em are in so much danger, my visit will do 'em no good now.
 Beatrice: I have heard you say, Sir, a proper dose given at a lucky time---
 Doctor: Go, bring me only my Incision Knife; for while the natural heat remains, I shall more easily come at the Lacteal Veins, which convey the Chyle to the Heart, for Sanguification, or encrease of Blood.
 Beatrice: But, Sir, you won't begin the Anatomy before the Doctors come.
 Doctor: Fetch it, I say.

The increasingly secretive nature of human dissection had particular implications for the female body. Although women were dissected less frequently than men, they were also sentenced to dissection for lesser crimes, and this, arguably, was not only because their criminalized corpses were so rare, but also because their bodies had a seductive allure even in death.⁵³ Kate Cregan argues that the “peep show” nature of the anatomical theatre and the Restoration stage were fused together in a new style of anatomical textbook that allowed readers to lift flaps on a page to uncover the inner layers of the human body, such as Joseph Moxon’s 1675 edition of Johan Remmelin’s *Catoptrum microcosmicum*.⁵⁴ Such an action likened the peeling of the skin to the stripping of layers of clothing, and this connection was not lost on a seventeenth century audience. In fact, Moxon dedicated his printing to Nell Gwyn, the famous actress and mistress of Charles II, a woman who, as Cregan puts it, “was not shy in the public demonstration of her own frame and disposition.”⁵⁵ Just as women’s bodies were zealously examined upon the Restoration stage, they also had a particular appeal in the anatomical theatre, drawing larger audiences than their male counterparts and erotically memorialized in iconography such as an unnerving eighteenth century anatomical model that depicts a woman

⁵³ See K. Park, *Secrets of Women* 14 and Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* 94. See also Chapter 4 for more discussion of the appeal of female anatomies.

⁵⁴ Cregan, “Edward Ravenscroft’s *The Anatomist*” 21-22.

⁵⁵ Cregan, “Edward Ravenscroft’s *The Anatomist*” 22.

“chained down upon a table, as if opened alive.”⁵⁶ Carlino describes the boasting in fifteenth and sixteenth century anatomical literature as “necrophilic”⁵⁷ and Richardson believes that there is little doubt that “some of the indecency of the dissection room was sexual.”⁵⁸ A cartoon of the “Day of Resurrection” in a London anatomy school, for example, depicts a woman demanding the return of her virginity, which had apparently been lost in the dissection rooms of the school.⁵⁹ Whether it was the body of the actress pedestaled upon the stage to be undressed by the eyes or the felon’s body disrobed and laid bare upon the dissection table, a necrophilic desire for control over the body appears to be at the core of this constellation of events.

Although the pretend corpses of Crispin and Old Gerald are both male, the sexual threats to both Angelica and Beatrice in *The Anatomist* are interwoven with the threats to the body doomed for dissection. It would certainly be unusual for a seventeenth century doctor to have a female assistant like Beatrice, but in the context of the play, it is a convenient set-up for the advances the Doctor makes on her. Crispin is suspicious of the illicit activity that might occur in the dissection room, commenting to Beatrice that “this place is very private, at a convenient distance from the house too.”⁶⁰ His suspicions are confirmed when the Doctor smoothly transitions from instructing Beatrice how to care for the dead body when it arrives in the dissection room to admiring the carnal charms of her body:

Doctor: Ha! Beatrice, let me see, what have you there?
Beatrice: Where, Sir, What do you mean?
Doctor: Sirrah, there. Let's see those pretty Bubbies.
Beatrice: *Eye* Sir, you make me blush.
Doctor: Faith I will see 'em; *I* and feel 'em too.
Beatrice: You old men have such odd fancies in you.

⁵⁶ Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* 95.

⁵⁷ Carlino 194.

⁵⁸ Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* 94.

⁵⁹ Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* 96.

⁶⁰ Ravenscroft.

Doctor: I am a Cock 'o'th' Game, you little Rogue. (emphasis mine)⁶¹

Beatrice's use of "Eye" for "Ay" and the Doctor's substitution of "I" for the same word may of course result from the unstandardized spelling in the play text, but they are nevertheless interesting verbal slips given the Doctor's insinuation that he (the subject of the anatomical proceedings) has the authority to first see her breasts (the anatomical object) and then feel them too. The anatomical theatre awakens the senses, and lusty gaze leads to lascivious touch. Old Gerald, as well, makes advances on Beatrice after she mentions the dissection room and is even more amorous in his desire to meet with Angelica after Beatrice suggests they rendezvous in the dissecting apartment. Sex and dissection are also drawn together at the end of the play, when the couple who have snuck off to Angelica's room return to the dissection room to announce their secret consummation of the marriage.

While the play overtly critiques the social dynamics of power surrounding dissection, I believe this play, consciously or subconsciously, also reflects deeper metaphysical concerns at play in the anatomical theatre space. Interwoven with the play's social indictment, we find an ontological anxiety surrounding the nature of life and death. In fact, this was very much part of societal concerns at the time surrounding not only the treatment of the exploited poor/criminal/female body, but the treatment of the corpse in general, which very much might still be in possession of an animating principle. The obsession of the period with stories of spontaneous resurrections and premature interments reveals growing unease concerning the ability of medicine to accurately determine the respective signs of life and death.⁶² As a result, by

⁶¹ Ravenscroft.

⁶² Death was becoming more of a process, as we think of it today, than an instantaneous event (Bondeson, *Buried Alive* 112). Another famous story circulating at the time of *The Anatomist* was that of Marjorie Elphinstone, who was buried in a shallow grave by a sexton who returned under the cover of darkness to steal her jewels. When he attempted to cut off a finger to remove a ring, she woke up, climbed out of her grave, and walked home (Bondeson, *Buried Alive* 40).

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, coffins were developed with elaborate alert systems for individuals to notify the living should they find themselves buried alive.⁶³ No longer were the standard palpable signs of pulse and breath good enough to signify death. In his translation and edition of Winslow's *The Uncertainty of the Signs of Death*, for example, Jean-Jacques Bruhier d'Ablaincourt cites seventeenth century cases of individuals living for a considerable period of time without heartbeat and respiration.⁶⁴ The real life or death consequences behind the play's comic trope of vivisection is evident in the Doctor's wife's comments near the end of the play that she has heard of individuals being "hang'd wrongfully" and later reviving and in the couple's panicked confusion over whether the miraculously risen body of Old Gerald is "Spirit" or "Flesh and Blood."⁶⁵ In *The Uncertainty of the Signs of Death*, Winslow notes that the only truly dependable way to prevent being buried alive, in fact, is to be dissected. Therefore, the dismemberment of dissection, in addition to being the ultimate punishment for the most heinous crimes, also claimed ultimate authority over the body's animation in an age in which corpses were not always what they seemed.

The theatrical richness of a live actor playing a dead body or spirit to confuse or delight both characters and audiences has been exploited throughout the history of the theatre. In fact, the British theatrical slang term "corpsing," meaning when an actor breaks character, might possibly originate from actors who failed at their jobs playing dead bodies. But as skillful as an actor might be at playing "dead," her micro-movements, the unconscious urges of her live body to remain alive, and the mere fact that blood and nerve impulses still course through her form always give the game away. The façade works only because we choose to believe in it, to suspend disbelief that that the actor is only pretending. As with any other role an actor might

⁶³ Bondeson, *Buried Alive* 120-121.

⁶⁴ Bondeson, *Buried Alive* 59.

⁶⁵ Ravenscroft.

play, “playing dead” is a convention that can be metatheatrically exploited. “Playing” a role always involves attempting to capture and convey social characteristics that an audience can communally identify as being particular to that role. For example, an adult actor playing a child might fidget, shuffle their feet, and adjust their vocal inflection to a higher pitch. And the greater the assumed distinction between an actor’s perceived social identity and the role he is playing, the more these social characteristics are highlighted. Shakespeare, of course famously explored perceived gender distinctions in numerous plays involving cross-dressed characters,⁶⁶ despite the fact that his audiences accustomed to entirely male casts would perhaps be less sensitized to such metatheatrics. The theatre is a space that confronts us squarely with the realization that many presumed identity traits are simply performative actions with no definable ontological basis.⁶⁷ As significant and as important as the theatre’s explorations of gender, sexual, racial, and cultural assumptions are, there is perhaps no greater presumed ontological gulf to bridge than that between a “live” human being and “dead” one. Just as playing a “woman” (or a rogue or king or any other role)—or an audience member’s mimetic engagement with an actor playing a role—allows the concrete signifiers that we might associate with that role to surface, playing a corpse brings focus to the presumed signifiers of life.

The comedic scene in which Crispin tortures the psyche of Old Gerald pinned upon the dissection table is designed to make the audience mimetically squirm as they imagine themselves pinned upon the anatomist’s table at the mercy of his “damnable instruments.” Beatrice pointedly asks Crispin to explain each of his multiple instruments to prolong Old Gerald’s agony:

Beatrice: ’Tis just like one of our Butchers Knives: and then what is that Ax
 for?

⁶⁶ E.g., *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Cymbeline*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Michael Shapiro counts eighty cross-dressed characters in early English plays (221-224).

⁶⁷ See Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.”

Crispin: Dis be de decolation Ax, to cut off de head at one Chop; as thus---
 Beatrice: Not yet Sir: What's that there like a Wimble?
 Crispin: Dat be to bore a hole in de Scull; when any part of de Scull be
 broke, and depress'd upon de Brain, with dis we bore hole hard by
 de fracture, as you shall see just-a-now.
 Beatrice: But what is this terrible Saw for?
 Crispin: Dat be de dismembring Saw, to Saw off de Leg, or de Arm: You
 see me presentale Saw off de Bone of dis Leg, and---
 Beatrice: Stay Sir; What's that sharp crooked Knife for?
 Crispin: Dis be de Amputation Knife, to cut off de Leg or de Hand, just-a in
 de Joynt.
 Ha! where be de Leg and be Arm?---

And so on. Each time Crispin brings his instruments close the body, to the brink of vivisection, Beatrice stops him to draw out the psychological torture for Old Gerard and the audience. In this case, the “almost” touch, the imagined touch, of the anatomist’s tools nudges at the borders of the audience’s own bodies as they mimetically engage with this moment.

Playing the corpse of the dissection table also meant taking on a distinct social role. By the period of *The Anatomist*, we see the dissected corpse seemingly embodying less of a universal role than it did in the early days of the anatomical theatre. The criminal corpse of the early modern anatomical theatre did indeed need to be “othered” in order to be tolerated as a sacrificial object, but its anonymity and conceptual stature nevertheless rendered it somewhat more of a universal object, rather than an object of a specific class. However, *The Anatomist* makes it clear that to play corpse is to play poor, and in this play and this time period, we can discern the tenor of a possessive aura surrounding the dissective process that is distinctly social in origin. The glaring presence of the corpse’s socioeconomic status allows for the erasure of its human presence and animation, rendering it anatomical material rather than autonomous life.

This “absencing” of the poor criminalized body is perhaps most intriguingly present in the most glaring omission of the play. As audience members we might be so caught up in the entertainment of the actors playing corpses, the thrilling suspense of their imminent vivisection,

that we may entirely forget to notice that the actual corpse destined for the Doctor's dissection table, in fact, never arrives. The characters make several references to the empty coffin the body was delivered in, but at no point does it appear that a body has ever been removed from it and utilized for any purpose. When Old Gerald is trapped in the dissecting room, Beatrice suggests that he hide himself in the coffin, and, in the same scene, Crispin is interrupted in his mock-dissection by the men who have come in to retrieve the coffin, but there is never a single mention by any of the characters of the *actual* body that was supposed to be contained in it. Somehow the coffin has arrived, but not the corpse.

Throughout the play, the body has existed as a fetishized object: the men fantasize about and threaten Beatrice's and Angelica's bodies; as pretend-doctor, Crispin relishes in his garbled knowledge about the body's anatomical properties; and the Doctor, of course, lusts over the possibility of conquering Crispin-the-corpse with his dissecting tools. In a sense, the other bodies have stood in for the cadaver throughout the play: in performing the corpse—with all of its economic, social, and gendered dimensions—they have demonstrated the power structures at work in the anatomy theatre. In these characters playing corpse, the live body becomes merely simulacrum, only crude copy, for as “playing corpse” makes blatantly obvious, death is inaccessible to and inexpressible in the live body. While the absent corpse in the play might be an unintentional dramaturgical slip on the part of Ravenscroft, I believe that, in the larger purview of anatomy theatre, the absent corpse has greater symbolic importance—bringing forth all of the aspects of embodiment and life that are elided by a scientific-dissective principle, illustrating the stark divide between the materiality and semioticity of the human body.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ “Performance,” according to Erika Fischer-Lichte redefines “two relationships of fundamental importance to hermeneutic as well as semiotic aesthetics: first, the relationship between subject and object, observer and observed, spectator and actor; second, the relationship between the *materiality* and the *semioticity* of the performance's elements, between signifier and signified (*Transformative Power of Performance* 17).

In *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder argues that our awareness of our living bodies is indeed characterized by paradoxical, yet simultaneous, absence and presence. On the one hand, “the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives”; we can experience the world only from our embodied perspective. On the other hand, the body is “essentially characterized by absence. That is, one’s own body is rarely the thematic object of experience.”⁶⁹ For instance, we can “forget” our body when psychologically invested in a book or a conversation. The body, however, resurfaces for us most strongly in times of dysfunction; it “dys-appears” as Leder terms it. Pain, disease, or social turmoil remind us of the fragility of our corporeal state.⁷⁰ As Leder astutely notes, the corpse can only be experienced in an “anticipatory fashion.”⁷¹ We can imagine our own deaths—“the corpse is always approaching from within”—but like the absent corpse of *The Anatomist*, “it is also that which never arrives.”⁷² In semiotic terms, we have the coffin (the signifier) but we lack (literally and in the Lacanian sense) the dead body (the signified). In the void created by this absent signifier, *The Anatomist* calls forth the social crisis at the crux of the anatomical theatre: the inaccessibility of death, and the ways in which it can be accessed only through fabrication, imagination, and social judgments. The characters’ assumptions of the role of the corpse, thus, calls attention to the deeply theatrical nature of the dead body that goes beyond the theatrics of the anatomical proceedings. One must wonder what the corpse would be if could indeed be brought on to the stage of *The Anatomist*. If it were a material prop, it would not be real *enough*, and if played by a human actor, it would be no different than the actors playing Crispin or Old Gerald. The authenticity of death retreats from us just like the absent corpse, and the inexplicability of death “dys-appears” in its place. The theatrical stage, as

⁶⁹ Leder 1.

⁷⁰ Leder 144-147.

⁷¹ Leder 144.

⁷² Leder 144.

Herbert Blau has commented, is one where we watch actors not only live, but also die. Of all the arts, “the theatre stinks most of mortality.”⁷³

Like the play’s doctor, who is emasculated not only by Beatrice’s rejection and his inability to enact his anatomy, but also castrated in the psychoanalytical sense through this rupture in the signifying chain that denies access to the signified, we too are denied access to the corpse. In a world dominated by Symbolic order, the absent corpse is the Real: inexplicable and inarticulate.⁷⁴ We encounter the fleeting shadows of its performance on the dramatic and dissective stages, but the corpse is always retreating from us. We perhaps desire it as much as the lustful anatomist, seeking self-understanding, assurance in eternal life, or whatever it may be that the unknowingness of death urges in us, but it mocks us in the ultimate game of Freudian *fort/da*, always appearing and retreating.

On the sacrificial level, there is no fulfilment for the rite here. The necessity of comedic resolution—in the pardoning of the servants and the happy marriage of the couple to the approval of their families—circumvents the darkness and unknowability that exist only in the undercurrent of the play. The peepshow gives us but a glimpse under the skirt of death. *The Anatomist* makes it clear that we cannot possess, or know, with any certainty the status of “you” (or “I” or “we”). In a process of theatrical dismemberment, the play undermines both the certainty of the body’s life force and society’s appropriation of the body. Death, at the end of the play, remains inexplicable, resurrecting itself from the coffin of medical, scientific, and social authority, and—through the characters that perform in its place—manifesting presence in its apparent absence. Under the cover of darkness in the theatre, the body has been snatched from us by the devious grave robbers of the Real.

⁷³ Blau 83.

⁷⁴ The Lacanian symbolic order is characterized by binary presence and absence—Lacan, citing Freud, writes that nothing exists except as it is layered over absence (“Nothing exists except insofar as it does not exist.”) (Lacan 327).

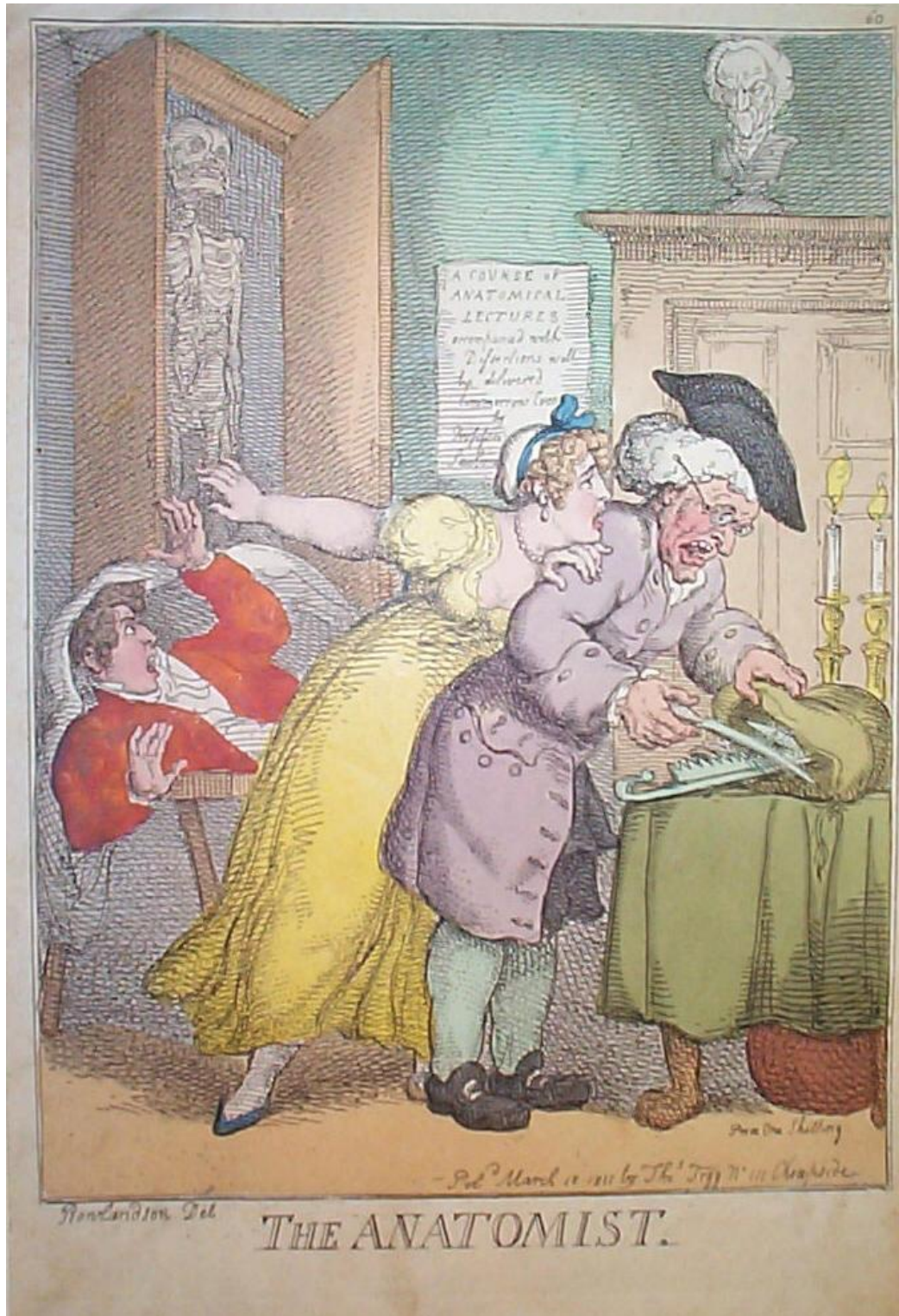


Figure 13: Thomas Rowlandson's *The Anatomist* (1811), possibly inspired by Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist*, although Rowlandson's depiction departs factually from the play: e.g., the young couple in the cartoon appear to be more well-to-do young lovers, not servants.

THE REWARD OF CRUELTY.



*Behold the Villain's dire disgrace!
Not Death itself can end
He finds no peaceful Burial Place:
His breathless Corpse, no friend.*

*Torn from the Root, that wicked Tongue,
Which daily swore and curs'd!
Those Eyeballs from their Sockets wrung,
That glow'd with lawless Lust!*

*His Heart exposed to prying Eyes,
To Pity has no Claim;
But dreadful from his Bones shall rise,
His Monument of Shame.*

Designed by W. Hogarth.
Published according to Act of Parliament 1734.

Figure 14: *The Reward of Cruelty* from William Hogarth's series *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751).

CHAPTER 4

Necro-women: The Monstrous Performative Corpse in Nineteenth Century

Freak Shows

In his will, Jeremy Bentham, founding father of the panopticon, dictated that after his death his body was to be dissected, preserved, and displayed in a specially-constructed cabinet for his friends and admirers to visit. He called this self-display box the “Auto-icon.” An 1830 addendum to his will describes his request for mummification in detail, instructing his colleague Thomas Southwood Smith to preserve his head through a specific process of desiccation practiced by the New Zealand Maoris. Then, Southwood was to place Bentham’s head on his skeleton:

put together in such a manner as that the whole figure may be seated in a chair usually occupied by me when living, in the attitude in which I am sitting when engaged in thought in the course of time employed in writing [...]. He will cause the skeleton to be clad in one of the suits of black occasionally worn by me [...]. he will cause to be prepared an appropriate box or case and will cause to be engraved in conspicuous characters on a plate to be affixed thereon and also on the labels on the glass cases in which the preparations of the soft parts of my body shall be contained ... my name at length with the letters ob: followed by the day of my decease.¹

In essence, Bentham’s Auto-icon inverts the model of his famous panopticon, immortalized by Michel Foucault as the architectural model of a society of surveillance, turning the gaze from the outside in. Bentham had spent over a decade refining this invention: a circular penitentiary designed so that a guard in a central tower could observe all of the prisoners in the surrounding cells without them being able to see him. Ultimately, the physical presence of the guard would become superfluous; the prisoners, not knowing whether they were being watched or not, would instead watch themselves. Although the panopticon was never actually built,

¹ “Auto-icon.”

Michel Foucault argues that it is paradigmatic of nineteenth century disciplinary procedures because it automatizes and disseminates power. In the panopticon:

power has its principle not so much in a person, as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes [...]. Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director, his family, his visitors, even his servants.²

Or so Bentham envisioned. Authoritative power in a surveillance society is ultimately dispersed into the psyche of a populace. In theatrical terms, in such a culture, one is always on stage. But with the Auto-icon, Bentham reverses the gaze, directing attention exclusively to himself. He assumes the positioning of the guard, but not his function. His stand-alone box puts him at the center of an audience that is both portable and atemporal.

Given Bentham's predilection for "-icons" and "-ions," it is compelling to find an interesting dialectical and ontological play between the panopticon and the Auto-icon.³ Bentham never fully articulated his reasoning behind its construction. We might interpret it as pure narcissism. After all, he writes in his will that his box should from time to time be carried into meetings of "his personal friends and disciples [...]" for the purpose of commemorating the founder of the greatest happiness system of morals and legislation,⁴ which implies something along the lines of ceremonial idol-worship; a quasi-god overseeing the sacrificial legacy of his own anatomization of social systems. Or perhaps we can also see it as Bentham's private joke at the expense of Victorian anxieties about containing death behind closed doors (or coffins).

Bentham, after all, was an avid proponent of the social value of public human dissection.⁵ But

² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 202.

³ An additional intriguing connection between the circular, all-seeing structure of the panopticon and the Auto-icon is the fact that visitors who are unable to pay respects to Bentham's icon in person can see a 360-degree rotatable, "Virtual Auto-icon" on the University College London website.

⁴ "Auto-icon." Bentham's greatest ambition in life was his pursuit of a "Pannomion," a utilitarian code of law based on the greatest happiness principle.

⁵ Richardson, "Bentham" 24.

perhaps most importantly, the Auto-icon seems to signify new ideas of self-imaging and embodied awareness pertinent to the nineteenth century: new theorizations of self-perception emerging from psychology and psychoanalysis; the rise of autobiography, self-portraiture, and a nascent celebrity culture; and the technological preservation of the self made possible through the invention of photography and the popularity of lifelike waxworks.⁶ New modes of presenting and preserving the self also meant an increased awareness of the processes of self-fashioning, and Bentham's detailed instructions make it clear that he had a defined idea of how he desired his self to be viewed by others. With the Auto-icon, the performance of self in everyday life, as Erving Goffman might put it, becomes a performance in everyday death, and Bentham's Auto-icon, a performative corpse.

However, as intriguing as Bentham's plans for the Auto-icon might be given his historical stature, perhaps the most interesting moment of his body's afterlife came when Smith began carrying out the preservation instructions in the June of 1832 after Bentham's death at the age of 84. The method of mummification used on Bentham's head, which involved drawing off fluids with an air pump over sulfuric acid, left Bentham's features horribly disfigured and it was decided it would be too macabre for public display.⁷ Instead of realizing his own elegant, idealized self-image, Bentham had become a monster.⁸ As a replacement for the botched mummification job, a wax head was fashioned and crowned with some of Bentham's real hair, and his actual head was placed in a small box alongside the simulacra.

Thus, ultimately, Bentham's half-skeletal/half-wax remains blur distinctions between real and artifice; indeed, they deem the artificial to be a better representation of life than the actual

⁶ Madame Tussaud opened her first museum in 1836.

⁷ "Auto-icon."

⁸ The publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* fourteen years before Bentham's death had resulted in a mass cultural interest in monsters and various iterations of resurrected flesh.

remains of Bentham's head, offering premonitions of Baudrillardian hyperreality and echoing, in an intriguing manner, the rise of the carnivalesque public freak show that was also gaining popularity at the time. It also links the Auto-icon to the panopticon in the sense that, in the Auto-icon (and in other nineteenth century displays of freakish bodies, alive or dead) *what* is seen seems to matter less than the *act* of seeing. The internalized gaze of the prisoner in the panopticon (the prisoner who watches himself watching himself) is dispersed amongst an audience—a crowd that gazes either upon the body of Bentham or the freakish bodies of conjoined twins, “fat ladies” and “savage cannibals.” These displays bring attention to the act of watching—to the dynamics of the space created by the gaze. Bentham's Auto-icon now resides at the University College London, where it is rumored to be summoned to meetings of the College Council on occasion and listed as “present but not voting.” His actual head, the victim of several irreverent student pranks and kidnappings, has since been safely tucked away in storage.⁹ Bentham's Auto-icon is a museum-piece, a cultural artifact, but also an eerie reminder of the instability of the borders between life and death and the monstrous effects of death on the body. “Present” yet not present, remembered yet dismembered, Bentham's indeterminately real or artificial remains reside in the gulf between presence and absence, monster and icon: the ephemeral stage of the performative corpse.

The subjects in this chapter are not cultural icons in the Benthamian sense, but women who suffered a double-death in their presentations as freakish bodies, both alive and dead. These three women—Saartjie Baartman (the “Hottentot Venus”), Joice Heth (the “161-year-old nurse of George Washington”), and Julia Pastrana (the “Ape-Woman”)—all escaped knowability in

⁹ “Auto-icon.” The grotesque resonates strongly in the Auto-icon and reveals how anxieties about death so often manifest themselves in humor: not only in Bentham's playful “attendance” at meetings and the pranks directed at his head, but also in the traveling freak shows, popular museums, and chambers of horror that so delighted and horrified nineteenth century audiences at the time of his death.

their lifetimes. They existed on stage only as phantasms invented by their white, male impresarios; their histories crafted by fictionalized brochures placed at the foot of their stages. Like prisoners in the panopticon who are seen but do not see, they existed only as “object[s] of information,” in their societies never “subject[s] in communication.”¹⁰ Unlike Bentham, they did not have the luxury of directing their posthumous appearances. However, like the ultimate icon that emerged out of Bentham’s vision, their deaths became realized (in the sense of “made real”) only in the artificial.

Rendered abject, all three of these women were delivered to the dissection table in the interest of scientific progress; their afterlives crafted by men solely interested in their value as commodities and as illustrative examples of their theories on human anatomy. Consequently, unlike the sacrificial (albeit criminalized) bodies of the early modern anatomical theatres, or Bentham’s body preserved for posterity, these women had their “corpse power” subverted. Abnormalized not only by their gender and skin color, but also by their anatomical anomalies, the bodies of these women appear to lack the ability to heal, enrich, or sustain life as the saintly relic or medicinal mummy did. Their only power appears to be purely tautological, reinscribing social norms and judgments. But they are also prime examples of necrophilic bodies, existing somewhere in the gulf between subject and object, where the abject body is also said to reside.¹¹ Their abnormalized bodies in both life and death were sacrificed to the preservation of a myth of the normal human body contrived by the combined forces of the scientific discipline, social order, and public anxiety. Consequently, the monstrous bodies of these women served not as models of the ideal body, but as visual icons of a sub-human, which justified the superiority of “normal” bodies. Thus, in these examples, we see an inversion of the relationship between the

¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200.

¹¹ See Kristeva.

incorrupt and the corrupt corpse; these monstrous bodies were instead subordinated to the ordinary body, raising it to a higher ideal.

In scholarly works on freak shows in the nineteenth century, Christopher Gylseth and Lars Toverud, Nadja Durbach, and Michael Cherner argue that their primary function was to illustrate for the public the scientific nature of the abnormal and unnatural in order to establish standards of the normal and natural human being.¹² The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had seen the mass democratization of knowledge through the opening of the first public museums,¹³ which allowed freak shows, as well, to operate under the pretense of social edification. These museums, including the Kunstkamera in St. Petersburg, the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, and the Charleston museum in North Carolina, gave average citizens access to treasures previously reserved for the educated and elite. For Russians living in a country that had never fully accepted the practice of public human dissection common in other European countries, Peter the Great's Kunstkamera became the next closest thing. The czar sought out the great anatomical oddities of the world, living or dead, for his collection and ultimately developed a grotesque menagerie of anatomical art including the exposed brain of a partially-decapitated child and embalmed babies in lace garments, along with living "exhibits" including a French "giant" and a man with crab-like hands and feet.¹⁴ Public museums that emerged from private collections such as this one resulted in not only the democratization of wonder, but also an increased pandering to popular culture and commercial profit. Museums, traveling exhibits, medicine shows, and chambers of horror became some of the most popular entertainments in the United States, amongst which was P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York. The American Museum, originally founded as Scudder's American Museum in 1810,

¹² See Gylseth and Toverud; Durbach; Cherner.

¹³ Bataille, "Museum" 24.

¹⁴ Anemone 583-4; 593.

was purchased by P.T. Barnum in 1841 and transformed into one of the most successful tourist attractions in history, drawing proportionally more visitors in its time than Disney World today.¹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, upon visiting the museum in 1831 mocked it as a pop culture atrocity, appalled that, in lieu of great works of art, he saw a magic lantern and stuffed birds.¹⁶ Like Peter the Great, Barnum populated his museum not only with inanimate wonders, but also with live exhibits, including Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins; General Tom Thumb, a 25-inch tall dwarf; trained animals; and an impressive theatre, called the “lecture room,” where he produced blackface minstrel shows, Shakespeare plays, and other entertainments.

P.T. Barnum, and his British counterpart, Tom Norman, were the masterminds behind the freak show, geniuses of identity construction. In the shows of these men and those like them, anomalous human beings were exploited for the titillation of public curiosity and the solidification of social norms. In early modern Europe, these traveling spectacles of anatomical freaks were popular both at court and at country fairgrounds, but they reached their maturity as wildly successful commercial operations in the nineteenth century in England and the United States. The Enlightenment period had aroused scientific curiosity amongst the general public, and museums and traveling shows capitalized on this, imbuing this discourse with “a sense of wonder.”¹⁷ Scientific curiosity in the Victorian time period was blended with folklore and myth, and dwarfs, “mermaids,” and deformed fetuses demonstrated the vast variety and spontaneity in the world and reminded viewers of their “fragile status in the natural system.”¹⁸ Early evolutionists contributed to the social justification of freak shows by making the study of both normal and abnormal human beings their life’s work. Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural*

¹⁵ Anderson 17; A reported 37,560,000 visitors attended the museum between 1841 and 1845, when it was destroyed in a fire (Cherners 69).

¹⁶ Tocqueville 66.

¹⁷ Cherners 4.

¹⁸ Browne and Messenger 156.

History of Creation (1844), for instance, was a widely popular, and controversial, speculative work on genetic mutations that helped lay the stage for Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.¹⁹ Continued exploration of non-Western societies reinvigorated popular belief in races of "tailed people, dwarfs, giants, even people with double heads that paralleled creatures of ancient mythology."²⁰ Showmen capitalized on this interest by exhibiting undiscovered types of humans, who more often than not were amateur actors.²¹ In addition, as Michael Cherners writes, when ideas of evolution began to spread, particularly after the publication of Darwin's 1859 *Origin of the Species*, "a psychic rift developed that freak shows were only too eager to fill. Freak shows established their own authority as agents of edification and progress, outstripping, for a time, the popular theatre in terms of respectability."²² This study of *lusus naturae*, or "nature's mistakes," became a popular scientific pursuit as the freak's body appeared to provide supporting evidence for Darwin's view that all living beings are in the midst of evolutionary transformation and that natural diversity is limitless, despite the fact that nearly every "freak" was fraudulently presented to at least some degree.²³

With white and male constituting scientific and social normality in this period, freak shows had particular implications for racial minorities and women. Supported by the forces of legal, scientific, and political discourses that naturalized and unified white people at the expense of nonwhites, many of the most popular acts of the period fulfilled the categories of being both

¹⁹ Chambers.

²⁰ Bogdan 6.

²¹ Bogdan 6.

²² Cherners 4.

²³ Bogdan 6-7; 10. Barnum's infamous maxim, "There's a sucker born every minute," proved true as Victorian interest in these exhibits hit a crescendo in the mid-nineteenth century. Although popular taste began to decline by the end of the nineteenth century for a number of reasons, including increasing scientific knowledge and growing sympathy for freaks rather than fear or ridicule, freak shows have persisted into the twenty-first century, often appearing as festival or circus sideshows, but also in permanent residence on Coney Island, where the Coney Island Circus Sideshow claims to be the last freak show in existence. See "Coney Island Circus Sideshow."

anatomically abnormal *and* racially exotic.²⁴ In antebellum America, displays of black bodies in traveling shows or popular museums can be compared to plantation traditions of “going before the master” or “stepping it up lively on the auction block” in which slaves were required to sing and dance for the pleasure of their owners or future owners. These moments, Saidiya Hartman argues, provided opportunities for white self-reflection on the human condition.²⁵ In freak show exhibits, African men (or African American men pretending to be unacquainted with “civilized” society) were almost always displayed as savages or cannibals, and dark-skinned women hypersexualized.²⁶ Along with other popular mediums such as cartoons in penny papers or the blackface minstrel show, freak shows justified the subjugation of blacks with their portrayal of Africans and African Americans as comic and grotesque. Barnum’s infamous “What Is It?” exhibit, for example, portrayed Henry Johnson, an African American with a tapered skull and presumed microcephaly, as a human-animal hybrid against a jungle backdrop: a “man-monkey,” docile and submissive, “playful as a kitten.”²⁷

In their tours in both the United States and Europe, the three woman of this chapter were inducted into this charade—their identities and existences, as far as the public was concerned, derived solely from the fictional biographies that were created for their displays. The first woman to be discussed here, Saartjie (“Sara”) Baartman (c. 1789-1815), or “The Hottentot Venus,” was a Khoisan woman displayed in London and Paris from 1810 to 1815, whose prominent buttocks and rumored elongated labia aroused the interest of European scientists and tantalized the public imagination.²⁸ In her twenties, she was brought to London by Dr.

²⁴ Cherners 31.

²⁵ Hartman 34.

²⁶ Durbach 55; Crais and Scully 3.

²⁷ Barnum’s “What Is It?” exhibit, Fahy argues, bears many ritualistic similarities to the degradation involved in lynching spectacles (21-22).

²⁸ In Victorian culture, larger sexual organs were assumed to be correlated with increased sexual drive (Crais and Scully 3).

Alexander Dunlop and showman Hendrik Cesars, where her display became one of the most popular shows of the early nineteenth century; audience members could not only gawk at her excesses, but could also reportedly pay extra to poke her buttocks, which were thinly veiled by a flesh-toned, skintight costume.²⁹ Her near-nakedness, in a sense, rendered her more exposed than nudity itself because of its suggestive potential.³⁰ Georges Cuvier, the famous French comparative anatomist at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, became obsessed with Baartman and her presumed hybridity, desiring to prove “Hottentots” (the Khoi people) to be a separate race, more closely connected with animals than humans.³¹ Books on “races of men” from the nineteenth century categorically distinguish Hottentot women from any other racial classification and express utter fascination with their bodily form. For example, John George Wood quotes an account from a Mr. Galton, who was reluctant to approach a Hottentot woman he encountered on a colonial property in southern Africa. So instead he calculated a complicated set of trigonometry and logarithms to determine the dimensions of her “remarkable protuberance” from where he stood across the yard.³² A satirical cartoon captioned “*Les Curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers* (The Curious in ecstasy or shoelaces)” depicts both the voyeuristic fascination of the British public with the Hottentot Venus, as well as the general voyeuristic culture displays such as hers inculcated [See Figure 16]. Each character in the drawing directs his or her gaze at his or her own interests. The man who extends a hand that is compelled to touch and feel Baartman’s buttocks, proclaims, “*Oh, godem, quell rosbif!* (Oh, goddamn, what roast beef!).” The dog, possibly symbolizing the animalistic nature of the spectators (or of the Hottentot) peers under the kilt of one of the Scot soldiers, while the woman

²⁹ Reiss 130.

³⁰ See Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 105.

³¹ Reiss 130; Crais and Scully 140.

³² Wood 221; Crais and Scully 3.

who stops to tie her shoe looks not at the Hottentot Venus but through her legs and up the kilt of another soldier as she says, “*A quelque chose malheureux est bon* (From some points of view, misfortune can be good).” As Denean Sharpley-Whiting argues, “thus, from her angle, she sees through Bartmann’s ‘misfortune,’ her openness, or rather, the opening between her legs, something more pleasing.”³³ As this cartoon illustrates, Baartman, in a larger scope, was absented by the constellation of gazes that surrounded her. The illicitness and allure of her forbidden genitalia and buttocks erased the rest of her personhood, rendering Baartman simply a transmutable object of the theatrical gaze.

After Baartman died in December 1815, Cuvier made a plaster cast of her body and painstakingly dissected her in the anatomical laboratory of the Museum of Natural History.³⁴ Cuvier’s dissection became the climax of the sexual violation of her body: He “finally got what he desired—Saartjie, horizontal, unresisting, under his knife” as Rachel Holmes puts it, devoting his full attention to her buttocks and sex organs, which she had refused to show him when she was alive.³⁵ In other words, Cuvier’s examination of Baartman was, as Crais and Scully put it, “rape, institutionalized.”³⁶ He excised Baartman’s genitals and stored them in glass jars of *eau-de-vie*, but he apparently was disappointed when he finally got to see and touch the fabled Hottentot “apron.” Baartman’s labia minora was not nearly as pronounced as the rumors had promised. Nevertheless, he concluded that the Hottentot was still deserving of its own racial categorization—closer to the great apes than white people in his estimation.³⁷ In the report on his findings from his dissection, for example, Cuvier compares Baartman’s buttocks to the

³³ Sharpley-Whiting 21.

³⁴ Full details of the autopsy are published in Cuvier’s *Memoires du Museum d’Histoire Naturelle* (1817).

³⁵ Holmes 95 and Crais and Scully 140.

³⁶ Crais and Scully 140.

³⁷ Crais and Scully 140.

“monstrous proportions” of the genital swellings of female mandrills and baboons and alludes to the other similarities in sexual instincts between black women and apes this must signify.³⁸

Once the dissection was complete, and Baartman’s genitals and brain safely preserved, her body was boiled down for a skeleton to add to Cuvier’s collection.³⁹ For years, Cuvier displayed these jars of Baartman’s remains directly outside the door to his private apartments in the museum. The plaster cast of her body was given to artists who painted it with as much fidelity to the appearance of her naked body as possible, with only a small animal skin slung over her genitals.⁴⁰ Later in the century, Charles Darwin and Henry Havelock Ellis would cite Cuvier’s work in their respective discussions of evolution and race, Darwin characterizing the Hottentot as a “somewhat comic sign of the primitive, grotesque nature of female sexuality.”⁴¹ Sometime during the 1820s to 1850s, Baartman’s skeleton, body cast, brain and genitals were placed on public display in the museum, where they remained until complaints prompted their removal to storage in the 1970s.

Baartman, although certainly one of the most famous, was not the only woman of color publically displayed as a freak to provide anatomical justification for racial and gender distinctions. The display of Joice Heth (c. 1756-1836), the purportedly 161-year-old nurse of George Washington, at Niblio’s Garden in New York was singlehandedly responsible for launching the career of the greatest showman of the nineteenth century, P.T. Barnum.⁴² Barnum acquired Heth, whom he billed as “The Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in the World,” for one thousand dollars from R. W. Lindsey, a showman in Kentucky who hadn’t been able to

³⁸ Fausto-Sterling 358. Buffon, a French naturalist, stated that the animalistic sexuality of black women even extended to encouraging them to copulate with apes (Gilman 83).

³⁹ Crais and Scully 139-141.

⁴⁰ In the early twentieth century, Baartman’s plaster cast also went on tour, appearing at the International Exhibition of 1937 (Crais and Scully 2).

⁴¹ Gilman 90.

⁴² Cherner 68.

turn a profit with Heth. The pamphlets printed to accompany her exhibition claimed that she was born on the island of Madagascar in 1675 and was imported to America at the age of fifteen, where she eventually found herself in the Washington household managing the nursery and the kitchen.⁴³ Now, at age 161, she was a living marvel; scientists sought to understand her advanced age, often hypothesizing that her race or gender was a major contributing factor.⁴⁴ Blind, toothless, and nearly fully paralyzed, Heth did indeed appear far beyond her actual years; newspaper reports described her as a 46-pound “living mummy.”⁴⁵

Heth toured with Barnum for seven months throughout the northeast, including several major exhibitions in New York. He taught her to regurgitate fabled stories of the founding father, sing hymns she claimed to have taught Washington, and insult the “redcoats” to the delight of her audiences. In Barnum’s care, Heth’s decrepit body, which was unable to draw enough attention by itself in Lindsey’s show, was turned into national memory. With well-executed “humbug,” Barnum led his audiences, as he put it, “by the nose like asses.”⁴⁶

Heth’s fame only expanded after she died of illness on February 19, 1836, and her body became the spectacle that solidified Barnum’s fame, or as one commentator crudely put it, “the funniest part came when the old wench died.”⁴⁷ After her death, the public clamored for an autopsy that would reveal the secrets of Heth’s prolonged life, which Barnum arranged six days after she passed.⁴⁸ Somewhere between 700 and 1500 spectators joined the respected surgeon Dr. David L. Rogers in a makeshift anatomical theatre set up in New York’s City Saloon.⁴⁹ Barnum

⁴³ “The Life of Joice Heth.”

⁴⁴ Reiss 2.

⁴⁵ “The Life of Joice Heth.”

⁴⁶ P.T. Barnum 27.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Reiss 1.

⁴⁸ The corpses of many human anomalies were popular objects of study for anatomists from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries and the findings of these postmortems were published widely (Reiss 127).

⁴⁹ Most reports say 1000 people attended, although estimates vary. Rogers had previously conducted several notable anatomies before Heth’s, including the bodies of the pirates Charles Gibbs and Manuel Fernandez. Reiss subjected

charged 50 cents apiece for attendance: the going rate for a good seat at the opera.⁵⁰ Rogers had previously expressed his doubts as to Heth's age during her lifetime, and his opening of her abdominal cavity validated his suspicions. As *The New York Sun* reported, Rogers announced to the audience that Heth's viscera and liver were healthy and free of disease. He found only the slightest degree of ossification in the aorta. Her brain was healthy and the sutures of her skull easily separated, which would have been unlikely in a woman of such advanced age. "It seemed to be the unanimous opinion of all the medical gentlemen present," reported the *Sun*, "that Joice Heth could not have been more than *seventy-five*, or, at the utmost, *eighty years of age!*"⁵¹ Her dissection was supposed to last three hours, but within twenty minutes, there was apparently nothing left to discover. Afterwards, however, Barnum made a few extra dollars by allowing an undertaker to display her in her coffin for three days.⁵² What happened to Heth's remains after this is a mystery, overshadowed by various conflicting reports, some of which proclaimed that it was the autopsy that was the fraud and not Heth, who was reported to be alive and well in Connecticut.⁵³

The third woman of this chapter's discussion, Julia Pastrana (1834-1860), who was displayed as a traveling spectacle throughout the U.S., England and the European continent from 1857 to 1860 and then as a mummified body for a century after her death, presents another disturbing example of the deadening of human empathy that results from a dichotomous divide between "human" and "subhuman" bodies. Pastrana was born with hypertrichosis terminalis, a rare genetic disorder resulting in considerable male-patterned facial hair, irregular teeth, and

Fernandez's body to an experiment designed to demonstrate the existence of "animal electricity," shocking various body parts into movement with only partial success in front of an audience (Reiss 135-136).

⁵⁰ Reiss 135.

⁵¹ "Dissection of Joice Heth."

⁵² P.T. Barnum 50-51.

⁵³ "The Joice Heth Hoax."

facial distortion. In both life and death, she played a key role in the growing debate over evolution: in the U.S. she was originally advertised as the “Bear-Woman,” but by the time she reached Britain—and by the time Darwinism had become more firmly entrenched in intellectual circles—she was the “Ape-woman.” Pastrana’s early life is a mystery; her obviously fictionalized display pamphlet claims she was Mexican Indian by birth, a member of the so-called “Root Digger” Indians. As a toddler, the pamphlet claimed, she was discovered by cowboys in an isolated desert cave in an area populated with monkeys, baboons, and bears.⁵⁴ Four feet six inches tall, 120 pounds, with the purported affability and intellect of an eight-year-old child, Pastrana was more “it” than “she”: an advertisement for her appearance at Gothic Hall proclaimed “its jaws, jagged fangs and ears are terrifically hideous [...] nearly its whole frame is coated with long glossy hair.”⁵⁵ As with Baartman, men of science were particularly fascinated with her female sex traits. In *The Lancet*, for example, Dr. J. Z. Laurence makes a point out of emphasizing her remarkably well-developed breasts and regular menstruation.⁵⁶ When U.S. scientists examined her hair under a microscope, it was decided she was a distinct species.⁵⁷ Pastrana’s early exhibitions were immensely successful across Europe and numerous showmen soon became interested in buying her. Her impresario, Theodore Lent, however, thwarted their ambitions by marrying her, but the act and the marriage were short-lived. After becoming pregnant with Lent’s child and suffering through a difficult delivery in the March of 1860, Pastrana died of infection six days after giving birth to a boy who, like her, was born with hair

⁵⁴ Despite the fact that baboons are not indigenous to the Americas. The pamphlet also reports that the woman Pastrana was found with claimed that she had been imprisoned there by hostile Indians and the child was not hers but she had taken care of her in captivity. Julia was taken to the nearest town where she was brought up a servant girl in the governor’s house (219).

⁵⁵ Browne and Messenger 156.

⁵⁶ Bondeson, *Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* 223.

⁵⁷ Browne and Messenger 158.

covering large portions of his body.⁵⁸ The baby lived only thirty-five hours, and it was widely reported that Pastrana had died of a broken heart over her monstrous birth.⁵⁹

Like the showmen of Baartman and Heth, however, Lent was determined that Pastrana's death should not be the curtain call for her show. He contacted Professor Sokolov at the Moscow University, an expert at embalming who had developed his own special preservation technique, which blended mummification and taxidermy and resulted in a more lifelike appearance in the preserved corpse.⁶⁰ Lent sold the bodies to Sokolov, who intended to display them in the anatomical museum at the university.⁶¹ But when he saw the remarkable results six months later, Lent bought Pastrana and his son back from Sokolov and began exhibiting his mummified former wife along with his son; meanwhile, he married another bearded woman, Marie Batel, whom Lent convinced to call herself Zenora Pastrana and pretend to be Julia's sister.⁶²

While dissections of anatomically abnormal individuals were fairly common in the nineteenth century, Pastrana is singular in that her afterlife consisted of a century-long tour of carnivals and shows that would find her passing through the hands of several owners and appearing in several European countries. In the early 1970s, her last owner, Hans Lund, upon being offered an apparently inadequate sum of money for her remains (now collecting dust in his garage), gave her a once-over with a vacuum cleaner and indignantly put her back on tour for a

⁵⁸ Bondeson, *Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* 229. Once hypertrichosis lanuginosa was studied and more widely understood in the twentieth century, researchers discovered that the odds a parent will pass these genes onto a child is 50 percent (Gylseth and Toverud 69).

⁵⁹ Gylseth and Toverud 69.

⁶⁰ Gylseth and Toverud 71.

⁶¹ Gylseth and Toverud 72. Sokolov posed Julia with her hands on hips, legs apart, and chin lifted; she appears self-confident, intelligent, even defiant. She is dressed in a scandalously short silk dress she had made herself, decorated in pearls, precious stones and feathers. Her son is posed in a standing position, making him seem older than his one and a half days and giving him the appearance, some remarked, of a stuffed parrot (Gylseth and Toverud 78). [See Figure 17]

⁶² Gylseth and Toverud 90. The mummification results were so lifelike, in fact, that photographs of Pastrana after her death have often been mistakenly identified as being of her live body.

final time.⁶³ Once again, Julia was displayed behind exhibition handbills that declared she was a human-ape hybrid. But Lund had overestimated her current worth; in the 1970s, as Gylseth and Toverud put it, “stuffed women were no longer in vogue.”⁶⁴ Despite one employee’s attempt to defend the show by comparing it to the display of the relics of Catholic saints, the public and newspapers widely condemned it.⁶⁵ After her failed display, Julia’s body was placed into storage and forgotten about until 1976 when four boys broke into Lund’s carnival warehouse at Rommen and discovered Julia and her son. Not realizing they were real people, one of the boys ripped Julia’s arm off and took it with them. Julia’s child, they discovered, had been mostly devoured by mice and rats.⁶⁶ When police investigated the scene of the break-in, they took Julia’s body back to the police headquarters to be stashed and threw the tattered, decaying baby in the garbage.⁶⁷

For all three of these women, their categorization as abnormal freaks facilitated the atrocities enacted on their bodies. From a Foucauldian perspective, they functioned as tools in a normalizing machine that puts every individual’s body, desires, and transgressions on constant display and seeks to suppress deviance through self-policing. In such a society, they were integrally important as cultural tools because they provided highly visible objects of alterity. As Foucault says of the monster, their cultural construction in this sense is “strictly tautological, since the characteristic feature of the monster is to express itself as, precisely, monstrous, to be the explanation of every little deviation that may derive from it, but to be unintelligible itself.”⁶⁸

⁶³ Gylseth and Toverud 142.

⁶⁴ Gylseth and Toverud 142.

⁶⁵ Gylseth and Toverud 142.

⁶⁶ Gylseth and Toverud 154.

⁶⁷ Gylseth and Toverud 154.

⁶⁸ Foucault, *Abnormal* 56-57.

As Derrida states, societies gain control over their monsters by incorporating them into existing structures:

as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it, one begins, because of the “as such”—it is a monster *as* monster—to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure of the monster. And the movement of accustoming oneself, but also of legitimation and, consequently, of normalization, has already begun.⁶⁹

By creating a continuum out of humanity, the containment of the monstrous body in museums, theatres, sideshows, and chambers of horror became a powerful means by which abnormality could be safely contained under the guise of intellectual and scientific progress and democratic access to knowledge.⁷⁰ Therefore, unlike the sacrificial objects of the early modern anatomical theatres, these women and others categorized as “freaks” were criminalized not by any immoral actions on their part, but by default because of their race, gender, and physiological aberrance. They therefore participated in an anatomical “sacrificial order” that “designate[d] certain categories of people as more or less valuable than others, according to their closeness to nature and distance from the fully human.”⁷¹ Their monstrosity becomes justification for their employment as commodities and experimental objects, and in doing so they illustrate that the performative body of the “other” on stage is always already dead, the victim of a type of social death, a “living mummy” (as Heth was called), emptied of its individuality and useful only because of its physiological aberrance.

It is, of course, not a new argument that the nonwhite body is always othered in a Western context; existing as a commodity in the circulation of goods and ideas, human flesh alchemized into gold.⁷² But what I am concerned with here is how this fungibility of the othered

⁶⁹ Derrida 186.

⁷⁰ See also *The Birth of the Museum* by Tony Bennett.

⁷¹ Waldby 52.

⁷² As Franz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “to be black is to be an object” (109).

body also extended into its afterlife. Indeed, the early nineteenth century was an age in which American and European societies were literally ripping up the earth to fulfill some deeper desire. This was the golden age of grave robbing and bodysnatching; very few medical institutions in the first half of the nineteenth century managed to escape riots against its faculty for their desecration of grave sites.⁷³ This was an act that particularly affected the corpses of those who had already been othered in life.⁷⁴ For instance, in *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, Harriet Washington describes how, in the United States, plantations in the south and African American cemeteries and hospitals in the north became valuable reaping grounds for the dissection table. One advertisement for the South Carolina Medical College in 1831 exemplifies this, proudly proclaiming:

No place in the United States offers as great opportunities for the acquisition of anatomical knowledge. Subjects being obtained from among the colored population in sufficient numbers for every purpose, and proper dissection carried out without offending any individuals in our community.⁷⁵

In 1788, the black community in New York lodged a complaint that medical students were making Bacchanalian raids on their graveyards “under the cover of Night and in the most wanton of sallies” to “mangle their flesh out of a wanton curiosity and then expose it to the Beasts and Birds.”⁷⁶ Physicians also complained about black communities avoiding hospitals during times

⁷³ Ross 62; Reiss 133.

⁷⁴ A writer who described the Doctors’ Riot of New York in 1788 suggested that the disturbance began because the medical students who previously “had contented themselves with ripping open the graves of strangers and negroes, about whom there was little feeling” had this year “dug up respectable people, even young women, of whom they made indecent exposure” (Reiss 133).

⁷⁵ Qtd. in Washington 115. Renovations to the Medical College of Georgia in 1989 revealed a fraction of those likely dissected, unearthing ten thousand human bones and skulls, many bearing the marks of nineteenth century anatomy tools and including a disproportionately high number of African American remains (Washington 120). African Americans still seem to be at higher risk of involuntary dissection today. The Uniform Anatomical Gift Act of 1968 allocates unclaimed body to medical schools and other public and private consumers of cadavers and minority groups are overrepresented amongst the “unclaimed bodies” of the poor and homeless (Washington 118).

⁷⁶ Qtd. in Washington 126.

of epidemics out of fear they would end up as anatomies.⁷⁷ Baartman, Heth, and Pastrana were only three of the many nonwhite bodies that were displayed in doctor's offices, hospitals, laboratories, museums, sideshows, and private homes after their deaths.⁷⁸ For blacks living in slavery in the US, posthumous dissection, which was horrific enough of a fate for whites, was far more significant as it seemed to extend slavery into eternity.⁷⁹ For women, this also extended sexual domination into the afterlife, as the dissection of women was often conceived of as a type of metaphoric rape (that is, if they were "proper" women).⁸⁰ The body of the black female slave, in nineteenth century America, which was eroticized by the mere fact that she had no legal power to resist the sexual advances of her master, was, in essence, raped in death through the act of dissection.⁸¹ Although Pastrana and Baartman were not technically slaves of the American system at the time (Heth presumably was), they arguably were enslaved in their complete reliance on their impresarios. In her play *Venus* (1996), Suzan-Lori Parks emphasizes this by developing a narrative in which the Hottentot Venus mistakenly believes she is exhibiting herself of her own free will (or rather more like an indentured servant) to earn money and return home, but in reality, because of both her physical and her cultural condition, "there is absolutely no escape" for her.⁸² And indeed, in London, the Secretary of the African Association launched a formal protest against Baartman's exhibit, claiming that when he attended the exhibit, he found her like a caged animal: "The Hottentot was produced like a wild beast, and ordered to move

⁷⁷ Washington 125.

⁷⁸ This has continued into the twentieth century. When relatives of Addie Mae Collins, the thirteen-year-old victim of the 1963 16th Street Baptist Church bombings in Birmingham, Alabama, opened her grave for reburial in the 1990s, they discovered that her casket was empty. Many contended that she had joined the thousands of anonymous and unauthorized black cadavers dissected for medical purposes (Washington 119).

⁷⁹ Washington 125.

⁸⁰ Reiss 155.

⁸¹ Hartman 80.

⁸² Parks 42.

backwards and forwards and come out and go into her cage, more like a bear on a chain than a human being.”⁸³

Because women displayed as freaks in the nineteenth century were also eroticized by their very staging, their displays in death, then, became overtly necrophilic. For these women, gender was not so much a trait they possessed as an identity, a particular employment of their sexuality, that possessed *them*.⁸⁴ The stark contrast between female, white freakish bodies and racially-othered women becomes strikingly apparent in the differing treatment of white “bearded ladies” and hirsute women such as Julia Pastrana, or Krao, her late nineteenth century counterpart. Iconography of white bearded ladies typically depicts them in feminine poses with fashionable hair and dress, sometimes admiring their own beauty in a mirror. Often their husbands appear alongside them in photographs, reinforcing their social respectability and femininity despite the transsexuality suggested by their secondary sex characteristics.⁸⁵ In contrast, women such as Pastrana and Krao were billed as animal-human hybrids or “missing links” in the Darwinian chain of evolution. Thus, their “animalistic nature” only served to hypersexualize them, as Victorian “civilized” society sought to separate itself from an animal kingdom ruled by instincts and bodily urges.⁸⁶ Because they were closer to nature, it was believed that Baartman, Pastrana, and Krao must necessarily have been less sexually inhibited, and therefore more alluring to a male gaze.⁸⁷ In Heth’s story, because of her age, this sex appeal was turned in crude comedy: she was mocked for her invented love affairs and jokingly touted as a marriage prospect in the newspapers.⁸⁸

⁸³ Qtd. in Goodall 105.

⁸⁴ See Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of this concerning the female slave (21).

⁸⁵ Bogdan 224.

⁸⁶ Durbach 108, 114.

⁸⁷ Durbach 108.

⁸⁸ Reiss 124-25.

The deaths of these women, therefore, justified the full possession of their bodies in satisfaction of the cumulative desire their forbiddenness in life had cultivated. Now the men who lusted after them could examine their bodies uninhibited by propriety. Frank Buckland, a connoisseur of freaks who pursued Pastrana throughout her life, for instance, reported that there was a “great rascality connected with the whole business” of her embalming, and while he carefully avoids giving specifics, it is not out of the realm of possibilities that Pastrana’s body was sexually violated or at least was the subject of morbid pranks.⁸⁹ Cuvier’s obsession with Baartman’s genitals, keeping them close to his private chambers after her death, of course, also supports this point.

A popular story circulating in the penny presses shortly before Heth’s anatomy concerned a group of students who placed a black female corpse in the bed of a colleague as a prank. After he discovered the body, he stowed it under his bed for the night and then the following morning took revenge on his friends by slicing off “some fine large steaks from the buttocks of black Sue” and feeding them to the pranksters, who promptly vomited up the meal once they were informed.⁹⁰ The necrophilic and cannibalistic urges expressed in this story connect it to the larger opus of the anatomical theatre, in which the necrophilic body is constituted as both phobia and fetish. As phobic objects, the bodies of these women fit into a historical and theoretical construction of vengeance on the black body as being first and foremost a “sexual revenge,” particularly evident in the lynching ritual.⁹¹ But they also call to mind the fetishized bodily “souvenirs” taken from these nineteenth and twentieth century lynching spectacles, in which spectators became participants in a body’s dissection, taking fingers, toes, teeth and flesh from

⁸⁹ Bondeson, *Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* 230.

⁹⁰ Reiss 156.

⁹¹ Fanon 159; Marriott 6-9.

the scene.⁹² The lynching keepsake was fetishized for its illicitness, for its aura of authenticity, for as Harvey Young argues, there is no substitute for the presence of the body.⁹³ The freakish body on display seduces and yet remains just far enough out of grasp—arguably, it can only be conquered in death. But the subsequent possession of the necrophilic body (or body part) remains unsatisfactory. For it too is driven by the same impossible necro-desire—to entirely possess an object and yet allow it to retain its autonomy.

Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject body, the body residing in the gulf between subject and object, can be applied to the bodies of women such as Pastrana, Heth, and Baartman because this space between presence and absence is indeed the locus of the necrophilic body as well. But it is important to emphasize here that abjection is not an intrinsic quality; it is a type of embodied response. Confronting the abject is a traumatic experience for the subject as it wells up bodily feelings of revulsion. The cadaver spews the repulsive fluids of our bodies; it is filth, fluid, and decay. The scientific examinations of these women while they were alive and their dissections in death, then, all join in one purpose: to separate these women, and their grotesqueness, from our genes, from our bodies. The dismemberment and dissection of their bodies was socially acceptable because their fictionalized displays had already denied them sacredness in life.

An investment in the theatricality of the displays of these women in both life and death, however, beckons us to consider what ripples beneath the surface, what drives a societal necessity for such hierarchical distinctions in materiality. The schism that Foucault famously draws between surveillance and spectacle—"Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance [...] we are neither in the amphitheatre nor on the stage but in the Panoptic

⁹² Young 639.

⁹³ Young 647.

machine”—seems to overlook how spectacle and surveillance feed off one another.⁹⁴ In the cases of Pastrana, Heth, and Baartman, it was the audience, fueled by showman and anatomists, that demanded their presentations, raved about the spectacle, and clamored for their dissections. Theatre is indeed a place of self-imaging—or in these cases—a site for constructions of alterity—but it is also a site of self-delusion, a medium that confuses distinctions. It is the realm of veils and masks and ontological and epistemological anxiety.

“Pastrana,” a 1909 poem published by Arthur Munby, who had seen Julia as a young man helps illustrate this point. In the poem, the speaker encounters a female ape on display at an inn, hissing at her gawking spectators. “Who could help staring?” the speaker asks. As he continues to watch the ape, he begins to doubt that she was indeed an animal; her expression takes on a “singular look in those fierce brown eyes:/ The look of a creature in disguise;” a look that “meant too much” and “reach’d too high.” Unsettled by his encounter, the speaker eventually goes in for dinner in the inn’s restaurant, where he sees a pretty woman staring at him with the same look in her eyes as the baboon. And the “white metallic thing that shines on her throat” appears far too much like the “collar and chain” of the “monster in the grove.” The suspense of the moment is ended by a man who approaches the woman from behind, throws a net over her, and carries her off as she ferociously struggles and bites against the webbing.⁹⁵ Munby’s poem conveys the increased societal anxiety in this time period over the nature of humanity, but also the suppression of these doubts. The speaker’s encounters with the ape-woman and the woman-ape rattle him to the core, but he ultimately psychologically represses them. The monster (monstrous here both because of its animalistic and its feminine qualities) looms large against the bars of its cage, thinly masked by a pretty woman’s visage. The plot of *Der curierte Meyer*, a play written

⁹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 217; Cray 17. To be fair, Foucault is responding to the specific politics of Debordian “spectacle” in 1960s France.

⁹⁵ Munby.

for and starring Pastrana, also presents the thin veils that hide the animalistic in the human. It revolves around a dimwitted German dairyman who falls in love with a veiled woman (Pastrana). When her pursuer was not on stage, Pastrana would dramatically reveal her face to the audience as a comic gag. When she does finally show her face to the dairyman, he is instantly “cured” of his love for her.⁹⁶ There are other examples in which the humanity of the women in this chapter became uncertain. One popular rumor about Heth claimed that she was not human at all, but a lifelike automaton voiced by an offstage ventriloquist. Pastrana’s hyper-realistic mummification job cast doubt on her ontological status for over a century: was she papier-mâché or flesh? Likewise, was the plaster cast produced of Baartman’s body intended to be just as good as the real thing? In all of these cases, these women’s bodies become detached from their identities.

In the examples of these women, we no longer see dissection depicted as a revelation of truth as it so often was in early modern anatomical theatres, but only as an unveiling of further mystery and uncertainty. Perhaps the most surprising and significant result of Heth’s autopsy was the audience’s refusal to believe that she was a hoax, preferring instead to believe that she was alive and well in Connecticut.⁹⁷ For conceding to this, of course, would have unmasked their own naivety but it also would have been the undoing of the myth that audiences had woven around her body; a myth that was more important for them to preserve than the truth. Heth’s audiences had imbued her body with their own emotional, social, and political objectives. They had taken possession of body, and they were not about to relinquish this ownership. Ultimately, Pastrana’s stuffed body was deemed to be just as good, if not better, than her live body in

⁹⁶ Bondeson, *Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* 224-225. German authorities, who already had reservations about Pastrana’s display subsequently closed the play after two performances charging that it was immoral and offensive (Bondeson, *Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* 225).

⁹⁷ “The Joice Heth Hoax.”

exhibition, Heth's dissection was called the greatest performance of her career, and Baartman's legacy could be encapsulated in small jars of preservative. The masks, veils and cages suppress the anxiety created by the transmutable identities of these abnormalized women.

In recent years, the remains of both Baartman and Pastrana have been claimed by their home countries in an effort to restore a sense of dignity to their afterlives, movements inspired in part by the work of theatre artists who reconstructed the lives of these women according to their own interpretations. The visibility Suzan-Lori Parks provided Baartman in her play *Venus* greatly aided in public support to have her body parts returned to South Africa, a campaign that began in the early 1990s, and involved Nelson Mandela, who negotiated with the French government. Baartman's remains were finally laid to rest in a state funeral in South Africa on National Women's Day in August 2002.⁹⁸ For Pastrana, it was Shaun Prendergast's 1998 play *The True Story of the Life and Triumphant Death of Julia Pastrana* that directly led to calls for her repatriation to Mexico.⁹⁹ A Mexican artist, Laura Anderson Barbata, who heard about Pastrana's story from her sister's staging of Prendergast's play in 2003, launched the campaign to have Pastrana's remains removed from their current location in the Institute for Forensic Medicine in Oslo and returned to Mexico, where they were finally laid to rest in 2013.¹⁰⁰ "A human being should not be the object of anyone," Father Jaime Reyes Retana fittingly told the attendees at her service in the town of Sinaloa de Leyva where she was buried in a white coffin adorned with white roses.¹⁰¹ Appropriately enough, these women who were constructed out of performance were reclaimed through performance, through reconstructions and re-membering of their lives. But as important as these efforts might be, in a certain sense, they are still related to

⁹⁸ Crais and Scully 5.

⁹⁹ Mather 215.

¹⁰⁰ Gylseth and Toverud 156; "World's 'Ugliest Woman.'"

¹⁰¹ "World's 'Ugliest Woman.'"

the same instincts that drove the social use of the bodies of these women in their own era. This time, it is directed to undoing the damage of centuries of oppression of abnormalized bodies, but this mission, nevertheless, also requires the resurrection and employment of token bodies to achieve its aims.

Ralph Ellison poignantly conveys the nature of this identity construction at the hands of others in the introduction of *Invisible Man*, which begins with the narrator musing on his own invisibility, which he compares to that of the freak:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.¹⁰²

In Heth, Baartman, and Pastrana, audiences have seen “everything and anything” except their selves. The alterity in their bodies allows for the masking of our own ontological anxieties and the possible fates to which we might be subjected in death—at least, that is, until the stories touch too close to the borders of our own bodies. We can see this in a moment such as the discovery of Pastrana and her child abandoned in the carnival warehouse, in the horror that is undoubtedly invoked in imagining children tearing a limb from her body, in the gruesome unearthing of a 116-year-old baby being devoured by rats and mice. Such a moment externalizes the discomfiting prospects of our own monstrous decomposition. When such an image is kept out of sight, it allows us to preserve our illusions, but the monstrous bodies of these women, violated in both life and death, brings a profound visibility to it—a visibility that runs deeper than the senses, that appears in a generalized sense of anxiety materialized in our own bodies

¹⁰² Ellison 3.

when we are directly confronted with and contemplate such a fate. In these moments, the monster escapes the cages of social order and flees into the psyche of the populace.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ See J. Cohen 5-6.



Figure 15: "Love and Beauty - Sartjee the Hottentot Venus," a print by Charles Williams (1822). Cupid proclaims "Take care of your Hearts!!" Image courtesy of The British Museum.



Figure 16: “Les Curieux en extase, ou les cordons de souliers” (c. 1815). (The curious in ecstasy or shoelaces), a satirical print by Louis François Charon of the Hottentot Venus being displayed in Paris, with two Scot soldiers, a gentleman, and a young Parisian woman presumably pretending to tie her shoe examining her from different angles. Image courtesy of The British Museum.



Figure 17: Copy of a nineteenth century lithograph of Julia Pastrana by Vinzenz Katzler.

CHAPTER 5

Opening the Performative Posthuman Corpse: Body Worlds and Twenty-First Century

Anatomical Theatre

The corpses were leaking. At the 2005 “Our Body: The Universe Within” exhibit at the Masonic Center in San Francisco, some type of fluid was beading on the surfaces of the displays of human specimens, sparking initial fears that the bodies had not been properly preserved. Immediate tests indicated that the fluid did not contain any pathogenic organisms.¹ Nevertheless, visitors were asked to keep their distance from these suspicious exhibits—bodies that had been stripped of their skin, with their muscles, nervous systems, and organs exposed, safeguarded from decomposition with a technique known as plastination, and molded into a *mise en scène* of animated poses. As the investigation into the nature of the apparently oozing corpses unfolded, the controversy only blossomed. The creator of the exhibit, Austrian Gerhard Perne, was accused of obtaining the bodies improperly; officials at the Beijing Medical University, where Perne said he received the bodies, claimed to have no relationship with him. A local news broadcast alleged instead that the corpses had come from a factory in Nanjing that supplies medical schools with specimens and that they may have been unclaimed bodies.² In either case, it seemed impossible to determine whether or not their donors had ever authorized their use for public display.³

¹ A professor of anatomy speculated that the leaking fluid could either be the plastic polymer used for preservation or body fat (A. Barnum).

² A. Barnum.

³ Exhibitions of plastinated corpses have frequently been the target of suspicions about the origin of their material. Gunther von Hagens, for example, has been accused of obtaining bodies from a Russian medical examiner who had been convicted of illegally selling the bodies of homeless people, prisoners, and indigent hospital patients (Ulaby). Bullet holes in the skulls of two corpses obtained from China sparked controversy that they may have been the bodies of executed prisoners (Lander).

In the past two decades since Gunther von Hagens' BODY WORLDS⁴ became the first exhibition to display plastinated corpses, these exhibits have never gone without controversy. Nevertheless, the tens of millions of visitors that have attended these displays indicate that something that has been decried by numerous sources as unconscionable remains not only palatable but also deeply alluring to a broad audience from medical professionals to school children alike. But, as I will argue, the existence of such exhibits is necessarily dependent on the distancing effect facilitated by their aesthetic and affective sterilization, carefully controlled by their performative and humanistic elements. Plastinated bodies are carefully anonymized; their fluids largely removed and their organs pumped full of hygienic plastics. Their humanness is mitigated; their messiness contained. So when the specimens of "The Universe Within" began showing signs of fluidity, both literally and figuratively, it is no surprise that they aroused repressed feelings of anxiety, horror, and repugnance. Something about the fluid collecting on the exteriors of these displays lay bare what had been agitating in their interiors, unearthing the persistent existential dilemma of human dissection that simply cannot be plastinated away.

It is my intention to investigate in this chapter the simultaneous attraction and aversion to preserved cadavers and the autopsied body in a contemporary context, as well as the profound affective relationships these performative corpses cultivate with their spectators—focusing primarily on Body Worlds along with the public, televised autopsies conducted by its founder von Hagens. In their performative exposés of complicated being, these exhibits reveal to us our anxieties concerning the fragility of our boundaries in the face of technology. The distancing effect facilitated by Body World's aesthetics allows spectators to retain a sense of control over the borders of their own body-fortresses: the physical and psychological barriers that guard their sacred places in the material world of the living. But when these borders are called into question

⁴ Hereafter, written in standard capitalization.

by the affective relationships inevitably forged in the interaction between corpse and spectator at the very threshold of life and death, the spectator's sense of self-differentiation is threatened. The spectator is undoubtedly confronted with one or more of the following recognitions: she sees her own mortality in the corpse, she is touched by the sensual proof of her own material fragility, she is fascinated by her privileged access to the unseen interiors of the human form, she is repelled by her own fascination with such grotesque matters, she is instinctively and inexplicably compelled to look in a society that discourages such impulses. And when confronted with a corpse that has not been largely dehumanized with plastics, as in the case of von Hagens' public autopsies, the destabilizing effects of such an encounter are only augmented, drawing spectators into a metamorphic relationship that exceeds mimesis, one that demands attention, particularly from those invested in the transformative potentials of theatre.

An exhibit such as *Body Worlds* confronts us with the realization that Cartesian thought is still overwhelmingly persistent in the medico-scientific realm, at a time in which media, technology, virtuality, and current theoretical trends of posthumanist, affect, and network theories seems to be drawing us toward a worldview of collective embodied consciousness that categorically threatens the frame of empirical knowledge. The exhibit's glorification of the machine-like efficiency of the inner workings of the body, not to mention its overt replication of Western artistic masterpieces, seems to celebrate a scientific tradition grounded in traditional veins of humanist and Cartesian thought. But the controversies these exhibits have spawned, the judicial debates that have played out in the sanctioning of their display, the existential quandaries they have triggered in spectators⁵ also call attention to the ways in which the body is, and always

⁵ To give a few examples, the exhibition in the Atlantis Gallery in London was interrupted by a protestor who poured red paint onto the exhibition floor and covered the exposed fetus in the womb of a plastinated mother with a blanket (Goeller 272). In March 2002, a visitor destroyed one of the corpses with a hammer (Nunn 197). Before the

has been, significantly more than an interface with the world. The unique intelligence of the body's sensory organs, particularly in intimate contact with other bodies, living or dead, and the impact of this interaction on consciousness and subjectivity, as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this project, become strikingly apparent.

The enormously successful Body Worlds premiered in Tokyo in 1995 and has since attracted over 33 million visitors in 65 cities all over the globe, making it the “most popular touring attraction” in history.⁶ Plastination, a technique first developed by von Hagens in the late 1970s at the University of Heidelberg, works by draining fluids from the body and then impregnating the body's cells with acetone using a vacuum technology, allowing the body's tissues to retain a muscular tautness. Depending on the plastic polymers used, the resulting specimens can be rigid or pliable. Preparing a whole body specimen is a painstaking and costly process: requiring about 1500 hours of labor over a time period of around one year and costing an average of \$40,000 to \$45,000.⁷ The success of the initial Body Worlds exhibits has spurred a number of “copycat”⁸ displays, including the aforementioned “Our Body: The Universe Within,” “Mysteries of the Human Body,” “BODIES... The Exhibition,” “Bodies Revealed” and “Body Exploration,” each of which has met with its own successes and controversies.

Despite differences in location and exhibit focus,⁹ there are a few key characteristics that structure a Body Worlds experience. The exhibit is always situated in a setting with a carefully crafted aesthetic ambience. In Cologne, for example, plastinates were posed in a garden-like setting landscaped with trees, springs, and a waterfall, recalling the illustrated surroundings of

exhibition's opening in Munich, which eventually drew record crowds, the Bavarian courts debated at length the ethics of allowing such a display before ultimately ruling that it did not violate human dignity (Goeller 272).

⁶ According to “Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds: Student Guide” 4.

⁷ “Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds: Student Guide” 9; Goeller 272.

⁸ Von Hagens' term.

⁹ Various exhibits over the years have highlighted the brain and nervous system, the aging process, the cardiovascular system, and so on.

the sixteenth century anatomical drawings of Vesalius' *De fabrica*.¹⁰ Indoor exhibits are housed in museum buildings with modern architecture and impeccable standards of cleanliness. There is also a physical separation of display types that guides the spectator's experience. One of the first exhibition areas typically contains a series of plastinated organs. Healthy lungs are contrasted with a smoker's lungs or a healthy liver with a drinker's liver in the interest of public education: the "dirty" organ signifying a corrupt condition, not unlike how the diseased body was seen as a sign of spiritual depravity in an early Christian tradition. Once the spectators have been appetized with organs, skeletons, and partial bodies, they encounter the full-body specimens—the climatic space of the Body Worlds experience. Here, the human body is exposed in full glory: some of the plastinated figures are "exploded" into "open-drawer" displays so that organs normally packed closely together can be viewed individually, others are cut into thin slices, allowing for inside views of organs and capillaries. Over 200 specimens are featured in each exhibition, with around twenty full-body plastinates fencing, dancing, playing chess and basketball, and riding bicycles and horses. Plastinated specimens of a bit more dubious nature, such as irregularly developed fetuses, are set aside from the other displays with a sign forewarning "These exhibits may be offensive to the viewer": a caution that not only serves as a gatekeeper to turn away parents with small children or the particularly squeamish, but also, and perhaps more often, challenges the visitor to an aberrant act.¹¹

These animated poses are grounded in a Western tradition of spectacular display of the human body, glorifying its potential in both life and posterity. The immortalization effect of plastination is often cited as a major reason why individuals choose to donate their bodies to Body Worlds; it is a more appetizing fate than "decaying in the dark earth and being eaten by

¹⁰ Hirschauer 30.

¹¹ Hirschauer 30.

worms,” as one donor put it.¹² Despite von Hagens’ insistence that his work is not intrinsically artistic (it becomes “art” only through the “judgment of viewers to the exhibitions,” he claims),¹³ the displays are situated in front of or next to quotes from Goethe and Kant and famous works of art so that the artistic allusions of the displays are unmistakable: *The Thinker*, a plastinate contemplating a “head” of arteries on a table, recalls both Auguste Rodin’s sculpture of the same name as well as Andreas Vesalius’ *Skeleton Contemplating a Skull*, a male knife-wielding plastinate reimagines Juan Valverde de Hamusco’s famous drawing *Male Figure Showing Muscles* or Michelangelo’s portrait of St. Bartholomew in the Sistine Chapel. Even exhibits that aren’t overtly derived from artistic masterpieces seem to make up a virtual *danse macrabe* of a Western canon: essences of Umberto Boccioni’s sculptures are found in the “Runner,” Salvador Dali’s mark can be seen in the “The Open Drawer Man,” and Hans Bellmer’s surrealist flair in the “Fencer.”¹⁴ Their intermediality is not only artistic but also performative, developing and deepening in the triangular interaction of exhibit-spectator-art history. These aesthetic poses have often attracted criticism for making a comic pageant out of death. Von Hagens counters that they are necessary to “dispel revulsion” and “promote emotional awareness.”¹⁵ This response, I believe, points directly to my belief that the aesthetic poses and presentations of the plastinates are crucial in making them universalized artistic ideals and not idiosyncratically human, which, of course, speaks to von Hagens’ expressed desire to render his exhibit in the tradition of the public anatomical theatres. Regardless of whether or not their references to previous works of humanist art are recognized by the public, however, their visual presentation unmistakably

¹² Qtd. in Hirschaer 33.

¹³ von Hagens and Whalley 31.

¹⁴ Hirschauer 37.

¹⁵ von Hagens and Whalley 32.

suggests and celebrates the perfectibility of the body.¹⁶ The plastinate, therefore, is presented as a betterment of the human body; it is the body resurrected and refined, sculpted like a statue of Michelangelo, rendered as mechanistically efficient as an invention of Da Vinci.

Because they provide a means of embodied self-preservation, plastinates are also very much of the idealism of their time: heralds of a posthuman existence that, while it begs reevaluation of humanist ontology, nevertheless, in a very human manner, seeks transcendence of its form. The posthuman acknowledges that “what constitutes a human being is now undergoing a profound transformation;” biology and technology are converging to the point in which humans are becoming less distinguishable from their environments, their consciousness “integrated with the world.”¹⁷ In this sense as well, the plastinates of Body Worlds become *more* than human bodies, more than their material substrate; they are “organic-inorganic chimeras;”¹⁸ humanity enhanced through technology, marked by its hybridity. In an age in which we are increasingly accustomed to reflexive images, to simulacra and simulation,¹⁹ they find themselves alongside prosthetically-enhanced human beings, cyborgs, computer avatars, artificial intelligence, and synthetic life. The plastinated corpse, with a shelf life estimated to be anywhere from a hundred years to infinity, provides a (self-)creative way out of a biological life cycle. But unlike other icons typically associated with the posthuman (e.g., the cyborg), the plastinate’s

¹⁶ Even though humanism tended to find the body to be a base substance, subordinate to the mind, it was also considered to be a temple—an attitude derived from the ancient Greeks for whom physical fitness was a duty of citizenship and a reflection of inner worth.

¹⁷ Pepperell iv, 77, 100. Pepperell writes: “In posthuman terms, reality is an energetic continuum in which humans are potentially indistinguishable from their environment. This is in contrast to the humanist view, which sees humans as essentially distinct from, in opposition to, and predominant within nature” (77).

¹⁸ Stafford 107.

¹⁹ i.e., as discussed in Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

power resides in its claims to authenticity precisely because it carries the residual presence of the material human body.²⁰

The “authenticity” of the plastinate, like the “authenticity” of the secretive anatomies of seventeenth century physicians, is further enhanced by its illicitness. The Body Worlds exhibit gives us the lurid ability, the right even, to gaze upon and contemplate what we otherwise perceive only in moments of intimacy, pornography, or medical emergency,²¹ facilitated by a deep-seated attraction, which, as Phillippe Aries puts it, goes beyond scientific curiosity to “certain ill-defined things at the outer limits of life and death, sexuality and pain.”²² Desmond notes that the exhibit is effectively designed to exploit the full potential of the voyeuristic experience: it emphasizes a visual modality and physical proximity, and it creates the sense of “a temporary time apart from, yet intimately connected to, our daily lives.”²³ In other words, the Body Worlds exhibition space is a liminal one: a walk-in *wunderkammer* of higher understanding with its specimens de-historicized, de-contextualized, and de-racialized into transcendent Everymen.²⁴ In this liminal space, perspective is renegotiated, as an anonymous respondent to Desmond’s survey on spectator experiences commented:

Seeing *human* bodies create[s] the emotionally troubling experience of having to be both subject and object at once. You’re looking at a thing, but you are also looking at yourself... In time, you too will be dead and could conceivably be on display just like the person in front of you.²⁵

²⁰ Von Hagens asserts that “in today’s media-oriented world, a world in which we increasingly obtain our information indirectly, people have retained a keen sense for the fact that a copy has been intellectually ‘regurgitated,’ and as such is always an interpretation. In this respect the BODY WORLDS exhibition satisfies a tremendous human need for *unadulterated authenticity* (emphasis mine)” (von Hagens and Whalley 32-33).

²¹ Desmond, “Postmortem Exhibits” 370.

²² Qtd. in Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 43.

²³ Desmond, “Touring the Dead” 175.

²⁴ At least this is what is attempted. Upon my visit to “Bodies... The Exhibition,” I was struck by the unmistakably Asian facial features of the plastinates despite the removal of their skin.

²⁵ Desmond, “Touring the Dead” 188.

Such an observation recalls the troubling ontological status of the corpse as described by Maurice Blanchot: its problematic “in-between status” somewhere between life and death, materiality and impermanence,²⁶ or Freud’s theorization of the taboo of the dead body. Indeed, the plastinate is a source of profound anxiety as it calls attention to our own mortality. Despite von Hagens’ assurances that his plastinates are all willingly donated, embedded in this ontological predicament is the unsettling fear that we too could “conceivably be on display” after death, a fear that highlights the lack of control we have over our own corpses. The flipside of this is the conscious decision made by donors to craft their afterlives as plastinated beings—a decision not entirely unlike those made by medieval aesthetics who prepared their bodies for holiness through deprivation, or monks in some East Asian countries who employ self-mummification techniques,²⁷ or others unwilling to submit to the unknown of death.

In the interest of properly situating the Body Worlds exhibit’s negotiations with interiority, it would be helpful to recount how human interiority has evolved both in critical theory and in the context of what I have broadly conceived of as the anatomical theatre and the performative corpse. Interiority has traditionally been defined as the inner life of a subject, the realm of subjective consciousness, that which lies beneath the material world. For theorists from Plato to Derrida to Deleuze, interiority, as it applies to subjecthood, is a conceptual means for coming to grips with the invisible, yet vital space of self-differentiation. From its first appearance in writing in the early 1700s, the word “interiority” has also carried with it the burden of truth: its borders protect the soul, the true humanity of the subject. Interiority is thus concerned with regulation, with protecting the sanctity of the individual (whether this means, for instance, the

²⁶ Lizama 18.

²⁷ Through the consumption of pine bark, resin, and other preservatives. See Jeremiah 13, 24.

individual's electiveness in a faith as discussed in Chapter 1 or normality as argued in Chapter 4).

For much of recorded Western thought, the body has been conceived of in terms of containment for the interior: it is a vessel for the soul, a material representative of immaterial consciousness, an aesthetic capsule. As its primary function was conceived of as a divider between the mind/soul and the world it interacts with, the body too became separated from that which it was guarding. Plato, influenced by Socrates, was the first to advocate for a division between the mind and body in pursuit of pure knowledge, a philosophical standpoint that downgraded the body to little more than a tomb for the soul. Avicenna, who other than Galen, was the primary source of wisdom for the early modern anatomists, also advocated for a mind-body divide. Aristotle, however, while also drawing a distinction between body and soul, was somewhat more of a materialist, arguing that the soul only comes into being through enactment—in other words, it is performed *through* the material body. Early Christian and medieval philosophers adopted this body-soul dualism, while also saddling the body with the additional burden of sin.

Jonathan Sawday argues that it was the invention of the “anatomical body” in the early modern period that precipitated the development of modern subjectivity and modern notions of interiority. The colonization of the “undiscovered territory” of the body’s interior by physicians and surgeons ultimately made it possible for Descartes to conceive of the body as machine and sparked the beginnings of what Foucault has analyzed as a culture of surveillance.²⁸ Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, however, the body’s role in critical discourse began to morph once again. Poststructuralist and postmodern thought challenged the notion that there is “an agency,

²⁸ Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* 4, 28-29. The Cartesian humanist perspective positions selfhood within the *res cogitans*, an immaterial realm of the mind distinct from the spatial and material world of the body, the *res extensa*, and posits that the body is simply a vessel driven by the mind-pilot (Descartes, *Descartes' Meditations*).

desire, or will clearly distinguishable from the wills of others”²⁹ and argues instead that the self is constructed by language, society, and technology, helping to usher in the more recent critical position of the posthuman. Theorists of the posthuman such as Katherine Hayles, Robert Pepperell, and Ann Weinstone have argued that, in the face of computer technologies, the human can no longer survive as individuated subject and human consciousness is no longer superior to any other type of intelligence, artificial or natural. This radical reframing of subjectivity, however, while downgrading the importance of human consciousness, nevertheless has done little to redeem the body; for embedded in the posthuman dream of body-as-prosthesis lingers a nagging Cartesian specter of disembodiment. The body still remains separate from the mind/soul; still imagined to be a pesky hindrance to the ultimate potential of disembodied consciousness.³⁰ Cartesian dualism relentlessly persists in many of the ways in which we interpret the body’s role in world-making.³¹ An encounter with a plastinated subject is an encounter with one’s own sense of interiority; Von Hagens has also argued that the aesthetic poses of the specimens do more than dispel the revulsion that might otherwise occur in confrontation with a corpse, they also provide an “optical bridge to self-awareness” in a Cartesian and Kantian sense, constructed through both intellect and instruction and aesthetics and feelings, allowing us once again to construct a particular vision of death molded out of artifice.³²

Contemporary exhibits of plastinates, however, are also framed by a world in which Deleuzian-derived theory dissolves material borders—subjecthood is constructed not within the

²⁹ Hayles 3.

³⁰ Individuals such as Slavoj Žižek and Erik Davis have argued that the Cartesian subject, in fact, only truly arrived with the advent of networked technologies (Davis, “Synthetic Meditations.”)

³¹ As Daniel Dennett has perhaps most infamously acknowledged, “the persuasive imagery of the Cartesian Theatre keeps coming back to haunt us—laypeople and scientists alike—even after its ghostly dualism has been denounced and exorcized” (107).

³² Von Hagen and Whalley 32.

boundaries of the body but in networked connections with the external world. Thus, the impulse to both transcend and defend the corporeal body finds a theoretical resolution in the multiplicities, becomings, and flows of the Deleuzian and Guattarian body-without-organs. The human body, at least in its organic (organized) sense, plays little role in Deleuze and Guattari's theorization.³³ The body-without-organs, on the other hand, is "a constant state of formation and reformation that occurs across and between a myriad of planes that expresses totality."³⁴ In the BwO, materiality could potentially flow into consciousness, consciousness into materiality. But as such, the BwO is impossible for the corporeal body to achieve. It is a limit, a pure desire, for the body as organized entity cannot live in the BwO as it is the "undifferentiated of death."³⁵

In an exhibit so focused on reconstituting the body, the theoretical construct of the BwO has unique resonances. Although the plastinates are fixed into permanent postures, as a collective group they problematize the borders of the body and the seat of selfhood. They beg the question at which point the plastinate ceases to be the living body with which it was once commensurate. Indeed, the plastinate extends the limits of corporeality beyond what is accessible in ordinary existence—coming closer to the "undifferentiated of death" than many of us ever experience. And consequently, the idea of interiority is complicated by this deconstruction of bodily borders. Its location becomes imprecise, its ephemeral borders more flexible and its agenda increasingly promiscuous.³⁶ In allowing us to gaze upon death without its normal stigmas, in the moments in

³³ Cook 187.

³⁴ Cook 187.

³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 149.

³⁶ Twentieth and twenty-first century body artists have demonstrated similar impulses in renegotiating how the borders of the body are defined. Stelarc, notably, has explored how the prosthetic enhancement of the body collapses both material and psychological distances between bodies through performances in which he enables audience members to control his body through the Internet or explores intersections between cyber-life and artificial life. Furthermore, contemporary technology has enabled us to see inside the material body in ways not possible before and numerous theoretical, scientific, and psychological methodologies—psychoanalysis, cognitive science, postmodernism, posthumanism among them—have also enabled us to renegotiate imagined borders of human subjectivity.

which the plastinated corpse opens up cognitive spaces in which our own mortality becomes all too apparent, the exhibition of plastinated bodies threatens to dissolve boundaries of human interiority as we know them.

Arguably, the plastinates of Body Worlds are a landmark change in the public display of the dissected corpse precisely because they are voluntarily donated, willing examples of the possibility of posthuman immortality. Unlike the bodies exhibited in the anatomical theatres or the “freakish” bodies of Julia Pastrana, Joice Heth, or Saartjie Baartman discussed in the previous chapter, the illicitness of their aura is of a different tenor; they are beings who electively choose a different path in death than normal decay.³⁷ This voluntary grotesqueness realizes the tension between social authority and individual autonomy. Although the arguments levied at exhibits such as Body Worlds concerning their care for human dignity, or lack thereof, bear some merit, they are indeed problematized by this voluntariness, raising the question of whether we are seeking to save these bodies from their dehumanizing afterlife or pushing back against our own dehumanization in the face of technological advancement.

Critics of the exhibit, concerned with the threat such engagement with the opened body poses to social order, often present the judgment that “any sense of visceral gratification [derived from the exhibit] renders Body Worlds culturally and ethically unacceptable” in modern society; anatomical displays are regarded as “prurient, eroticized, voyeuristic, ghoulish, and as motivated by a morbid curiosity rather than a healthy interest in the subject matter.”³⁸ Elaine Campbell, however, applies Brian Ott’s notion of “dirty theory” to make sense of the exhibition’s appeal without resorting to a knee-jerk reaction against the deviancy of the grotesque (indeed, of the

³⁷ Although, it is true that not all plastinate exhibits rely on voluntarily donated bodies; other exhibits have used unclaimed bodies, particularly from China. Body Worlds, however, claims to rely exclusively on donors (“Statement from the Organizers”).

³⁸ Campbell 314.

necrophilic gaze). A “dirty” theoretical approach, which enters the discourse from the perspective of erotics, foregrounds pleasure, particularly disruptive pleasure, and allows us to see how those things which provoke strong emotional reactions, which appear to be at the “limits of our experience and understanding,” enable us to see the *jouissance* and the momentary loss of self that also occur in these moments that are so threatening to both social order and individuation.³⁹ And thus an encounter with plastinated corpses is a destabilizing and alienating experience. In the liminal space opened up by the grotesque carnival of Body Worlds, the fundamental experience of the viewer is shifted, inspiring new conceptions of the human body that may once have seemed unnatural and forcing a reevaluation of the borders of human exteriority and interiority, presenting a distinct disruption in known social order.⁴⁰

But, ultimately, the full potentials of this disruption are repressed by both the humanist orientation of the displays as well as the sensory suppression in the exhibits. These exhibitions overwhelmingly emphasize the visual as a modality for interaction with the plastinates. The other senses are suppressed by the sterilization of the exhibit: the specimens lack smell; the only sounds are the incidental noises produced by the visitors themselves. This suppression of sensory engagement helps visitors maintain a clinical distance from the subjects, and indeed even the visual is carefully controlled by the exhibit. Jane Desmond argues that the specific visual connection between the subject and object encouraged by Body Worlds is carefully contrived, dependent upon on the elimination of the skin, the external border of the human body, which also

³⁹ Campbell 316-317. Fiske writes that *jouissance* “occurs in the body of the reader at the moment of reading when text and reader erotically lose their separate identities and become a new, momentarily produced body that is theirs and theirs alone, that defies meaning or discipline” (Qtd. in Campbell 317).

⁴⁰ The grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser has argued, particularly reigns in times in which belief in the natural order of the previous era has been overturned; for him, this was the sixteenth century, the *Sturm und Drang* and Romantic periods, and the twentieth century, but this theory could also justifiably be applied to the rapid technological advancements of the turn of the twenty-first century (188).

strips away the age, beauty, racial status, and social class of the subject.⁴¹ Unlike a taxidermied animal, whose preserved exterior captures the individuality of the subject (the beloved pet, the specific hunting prize), Desmond argues that the removal of the skin from the plastinate allows for the distanced stance that is common in the medical profession.⁴² The anonymity of the subjects does more than simply protect the privacy of the donor and her family, it allows the spectator to bypass a contextualization of the body as a deceased individual and gaze on it as a scientific object.

And it is crucial that this “right to look”⁴³ is a one-way process. As Desmond notes, the eyes are always removed from the plastinate and replaced with artificial ones.⁴⁴ Eyes, the proverbial windows to the soul, serve as gatekeepers at the borders between the interior and exterior of the subject. How much more disturbing might it be for viewers of the exhibit to find themselves surrounded by a graveyard of corpses, voyeurs from the unknown, peering at their own decaying bodies? Instead, the removal of the border of the human body and all the reminders the skin and eyes carry not only of the material encounters of the body with the world, but also the mysteries of the interior, allow the viewer of the exhibit to distance themselves not only from the plastinates but also from themselves. Even though *Body Worlds* claims “authenticity” as a primary appeal, in general, its plastinates lack the same visual sense of lifelikeness that draws spectators to other exhibits imitating human bodies, such as wax museums, that thrill with their “realism.” This de-individuation allows spectators to remove themselves from the humanity of their objects and coolly contemplate their pedagogical merit. As Joseph Starr notes, “Plastinated skin is ugly. Without the supportive and lubricative functions

⁴¹ Desmond, “Postmortem Exhibitions” 370.

⁴² Desmond, “Postmortem Exhibitions” 347.

⁴³ Desmond, “Postmortem Exhibitions” 349.

⁴⁴ Upon my visit to “Bodies...The Exhibition,” I was told this was because the eyes decay rapidly and defy plastination.

of bodily fluids, human skin looks pale, formless, wrinkly—dead.”⁴⁵ In other words, it is far too evocative of the cadaver for our tastes.

Claudia Benthien, however, argues that skinlessness, in such a case, actually produces anxiety about identity, for the skin is a crucial individuating boundary, and its removal poses a threat to “the inner and outer borders in which and through the speaking subject is constituted,” as Kristeva puts it.⁴⁶ It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the prominent exception amongst the flayed specimens of *Body Worlds* is also the exhibit that has notoriously drawn the strongest protests: that of a reclining pregnant woman in “the carefree pose of a reclining dolly-bird”⁴⁷ with a seven-month-old fetus in her opened womb. Numerous detractors have commented, rightly so, on the necrophilic portrayal of the pregnant woman, who does in fact retain a few small areas of skin in erogenous zones such as the aureoles, the ears, and the rouged lips.⁴⁸ But the fetus as well is also wrapped in its own skin, disarming the distancing process that occurs with the other plastinates.⁴⁹ We are confronted with the “conceptual violence of slicing the belly away to reveal the fetus, the presence of which forces us to grapple with the individuality of motherhood.” This insufficient genericization of this “mother/specimen” flirts with our thresholds of tolerance.⁵⁰ In this particular specimen we also once again encounter the grotesque; this time, in the tendency towards oppositional bodies: “one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born.”⁵¹ We also once again find the resonances of the rite of passage, of the sacrificial rite, which brings together birth and death.⁵² The pregnant plastinate’s discovery

⁴⁵ Starr 13.

⁴⁶ Benthien 94, 100; Kristeva 69.

⁴⁷ Cummings.

⁴⁸ Desmond, “Postmortem Exhibitions” 373. More recently, von Hagens aroused controversy by overtly displaying plastinates in a copulating position in his “Cycle of Life” show in Berlin in 2009 (Rhodes).

⁴⁹ Desmond, “Postmortem Exhibitions” 373.

⁵⁰ Desmond, “Postmortem Exhibitions” 373.

⁵¹ Bakhtin 26.

⁵² See Turner, “Sacrifice as a Quintessential Process.”

in a separate, curtained-off section of the exhibit implies secret knowledge, pornographic in the sense that her gendered sexuality is hidden from a social gaze, but also in the sense that she becomes associated with a lurid criminality as a result of what might be perceived as her transgressive motherhood—for when pressured to clarify her origins, von Hagens ultimately revealed that the mother was a drug addict who had donated her body after becoming pregnant.⁵³

But despite the exhibit's emphasis on visual interaction, and its correspondingly careful control of sensory engagement, it is often the compulsive desire to touch the plastinates that has the most significant impact on visitors, mentally, if not physically, shrinking the distance between the plastinated object and the spectator. Although visitors to Body Worlds are no longer allowed to touch the exhibits; this was not the case in earlier iterations, in which the placement of specimens in the center of walkways was strategically designed to enhance tactile contact.⁵⁴ Osterweil and Baumflek note that the desire to touch the exhibits seems to be a common impulse amongst visitors, regardless of whether it is sanctioned or not; “the mere act of *seeing* with one's own eyes seems inadequately stimulating or fulfilling. Like scolded children, we long to engage in the forbidden behavior of ‘seeing’ with our hands.”⁵⁵ Indeed, as noted before, some of the most powerful moments in the theatre involve touch—the rare moments in which the actor touches the audience member, massaging the borders of material interiority, but also the moments in which we watch actors touch, embrace, fight.⁵⁶ Touch, is in many ways, the most personal of the senses, the most invasive, the most immediately transferrable and transformational. In her book *Erotic Morality*, Linda Holler characterizes touch as the “primary

⁵³ Nunn 198.

⁵⁴ Linke 17.

⁵⁵ Osterweil and Baumflek 252.

⁵⁶ While physical contact with audience members is indeed quite common in certain performance traditions and performance groups (e.g., Richard Schechner's *The Performance Group*), in the vast majority of contemporary Western performances, it is still quite rare.

sense around which to compose a discourse about moral agency” in the modern world. The ways we touch and are touched “help to determine our repulsions, attractions and indifferences and our ability to respond emotionally to what goes on around us.”⁵⁷ Even when touch itself is denied, the sense of *virtual touch* that is invoked in such close proximity is enough for the audience members to intimately connect with the corpse and with their fellow spectators on a material level. If the interior is produced from the exterior, the immanent world of relations, as Deleuze argues,⁵⁸ it is touch that can be seen as the instigator of interior transformation, a means of folding together, in Deleuzian terms, productions of subjectivity from the interior and the exterior. Touch, as McCarthy notes, “is the mechanism that causes the body to carry traces of the interior on it, and it is the ability of the body to avail its traces on the interior.”⁵⁹ But it is also the undoing of conventional conceptions of interiority as containment.⁶⁰ Touch is how the borders of the body are changed in a material way: bruised, scarred, wrinkled, wounded, massaged. This physical touch reaches deep into our psyches: a feather brushed against our cheek—“cruelly” in the Artaudian sense—can alter our emotional state, resurrecting memories of the comfort of a soft bed, perhaps, the childlike wonder of a feathered plume between the fingers. Similarly, an encounter with the wounded body can affect us: the violence inherent in the plastinate of the pregnant woman with her womb unceremoniously ripped open (or the mock incisions into an actor playing a cadaver in *The Anatomist*)⁶¹ activate “trace” sensations on our own bodily borders.

⁵⁷ Holler 1. Claudia Benthien notes that “touch is the first of the senses to develop [...] And numerous studies with newborns have shown that after birth as well tactile perception is primary, followed by auditory perception and only then by visual perception (7).

⁵⁸ Parr 95.

⁵⁹ McCarthy 119.

⁶⁰ McCarthy 119.

⁶¹ See Chapter 3.

But as much as contemporary technological advances and modern distaste for confrontations with the corpse might result in a clinicalized, sterilized encounter with it, the anatomical theatre in its traditional sense has not entirely disappeared today. Von Hagens has also orchestrated several public anatomies in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The first of these demonstrations, advertised as the “first public autopsy in 170 years,”⁶² was performed on November 20, 2002 at The Old Truman Brewery in London in front of several hundred paying audience members and a handful of Channel 4 television cameras on what otherwise would have been an ordinary Wednesday night. This performance, too, was an illicit act, performed in defiance of Her Majesty’s Inspector of Anatomy Jeremy Metter’s declaration that that autopsy was illegal on the basis of nineteenth century anatomy laws.⁶³ Nevertheless, von Hagens proceeded, declaring before his initial Y-cut incision into the body, “I stand here for democracy [...] This is a democratic country, and I am sure there will be no arrest.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the controversy of this first autopsy did not stop von Hagens. After this night, he went on to produce a series of televised autopsy specials that aired on British public television from 2005 to 2007.

Von Hagens dismissed the medical professionals who stood in opposition to the autopsy by comparing them to medieval priests who denied the public the Bible. They, in turn, called him a charlatan, a butcher, and a sensationalist more concerned with “good television than scientific education.”⁶⁵ Comparisons have even been made between von Hagens and Nazi doctor Josef Mengele.⁶⁶ Von Hagens’ detractors, who argue that the human body cannot be treated the same

⁶² Cowell.

⁶³ Plainclothes police officers occupied several seats in the makeshift theatre charged with the duty of determining whether there was evidence of illegal activity, although no charges were ultimately filed (Cowell).

⁶⁴ Cowell.

⁶⁵ D. Cohen.

⁶⁶ Goeller 273.

as an art object or demonstration piece, certainly have justification to their claims. “Human remains matter,” argues Helen MacDonald, “The human body, whole or in parts, is never just an object just like any other, even in a room in which it will be dismembered. It slips between subject and object.”⁶⁷ In the Old Truman Brewery autopsy, located in “Jack the Ripper territory”⁶⁸ in London, the subject/object Peter Meiss was reduced to a public health lesson, “all his human frailties [the stress caused by his failed business ventures and his resulting alcoholism] exposed to four million television viewers.”⁶⁹ MacDonald argues that in this sense, von Hagens’ autopsy falls in line with traditional associations between anatomy and criminality and punishment: “On the dissection table, [Meiss] became someone almost deserving of public dismemberment—a lesson for the audience in the error of his ways.”⁷⁰ The othering of Meiss in this pedagogical context connects him with the other performative corpses that have been discussed in this project, whose abjection have made it possible for us to create categorizations that separate and protect our lives and our deaths from those of the deviant Other. MacDonald, along with many other critics, takes issue with the ways in which donated bodies are used by von Hagens, implying that even though Meiss bequeathed his body to von Hagens, we cannot know whether he envisioned his body being used in such a manner, divulged of its contents in front of an audience of millions and unceremoniously “sewn together by an underling” after it served its purpose.⁷¹ Even if the body was willingly donated to such a cause, its violation after death nevertheless stirs anxiety, sometimes on religious and spiritual grounds (the donator may not know what is best for their eternal soul), sometimes on pedagogical grounds (in the same vein as violent video games are criticized for corrupting our children). Beneath the surface of this

⁶⁷ MacDonald 3.

⁶⁸ MacDonald 1.

⁶⁹ MacDonald 6.

⁷⁰ MacDonald 6.

⁷¹ MacDonald 2.

ethical debate is an indignation, a concern for autonomy over our own bodies that, as this project has demonstrated, is nothing new but which is perhaps compounded by the highly visible nature of plastinate exhibits and public autopsies in a media-entrenched society.

Von Hagens' spectacular stage technique is modeled precisely on the performances of early anatomists who had relied on the "guise of performance" to mitigate what otherwise might be a "transgressive and profaning act."⁷² The anatomists who performed public autopsies in the heyday of the public anatomical theatres were well aware of the power of gruesome spectacle to enhance the impact of their "performances" and also their own authority over the human body. One of Vesalius' favorite dramatic moves was to plunge his hand into the dissected corpse and emerge with the corpse's heart held high for the pleasure of his eager spectators. Galen, while not conducting human dissections himself, was known to demonstrate the function of the spinal cord by making a series of cuts along the spine of a live pig so his ancient Greek audience could observe how it became increasingly paralyzed.⁷³ With such gruesome displays, these anatomists tapped into the guilty pleasure of horror as well as displayed their own cool detachment from the souls of living beings—as men of science, the body was their domain to conquer. It was there to prove the authority of the anatomist, his proficiency in confirming truths about the human body passed down through a Western tradition: a "constative act" in the same sense as a speech act is constative, informing the public "how it is" with the body.⁷⁴

Von Hagens deliberately situates himself in this history of anatomical performance. His omnipresent black hat and vest, so reminiscent of Joseph Beuys, frames him as an artist at his craft. When one spectator at the brewery autopsy asked if he lacked the respect to remove his hat during the procedure, he responded by pointing to the similar hat worn by the physician in

⁷² Carlino 81.

⁷³ See Galen.

⁷⁴ Bleeker 15.

Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), a large copy of which hung above the cadaver.⁷⁵ Much like the posed skeletons that dressed the stage of early modern anatomical theatres, von Hagens populates his theatre spaces with plastinated corpses and body parts. Cowell notes how the members of the brewery autopsy's audience variously "looked away, gasped, covered eyes, gazed in fascination, left the building, and at one point applauded" when von Hagens "pulled at the sternum with both hands and plunged into Peter Meiss's thorax to lift out his heart and lungs," as Vesalius was known to do.⁷⁶ The opening sequences to the episodes in von Hagens' television series *Autopsy: Life and Death* are equally dramatic. The "Circulation" episode begins with von Hagens contemplating a plastinated skull in his right hand in a Hamlet-esque fashion;⁷⁷ the "Aging" episode opens with von Hagens using the frail body of a nude 84-year-old woman to demonstrate the effects of time before moving over to a cadaver of another elderly woman and declaring, "Today I will attempt to answer these questions by showing you this 80-year-old woman sliced in half."⁷⁸ When the programs begin, the television viewers find themselves in a brightly-lit studio, similar to one used by any number of television talk shows, where von Hagens theatrically reveals cadavers for dissection or uses the nude bodies of live models to demonstrate anatomical principles.

But despite the humanist overtones of *Body Worlds* and von Hagens' autopsies, it is my belief that in the autopsy, the boundaries of both corpse and spectator are always renegotiated in the moment of contact, or at least close proximity. Identity emerges and is renegotiated in relation to the other, through affectivity. Traditional humanist notions of boundaries and being are called into question. In his book on the posthuman, Robert Pepperell convincingly responds

⁷⁵ Cowell.

⁷⁶ Cowell; MacDonald 7.

⁷⁷ It also recalls von Hagens' own plastinate exhibit in the same pose: "The Thinker" ("Circulation").

⁷⁸ "Aging."

to the reductionism inherent in relying on the perceived solidity of our material exteriors with the analogy of a bullet: A bullet piercing the body does not negate the fact that the body has no fixed boundaries. It would simply mean that those indefinite boundaries had undergone a transformation, “probably increasing the surface area over which I am distributed, making the job of fixing my boundaries even less precise.”⁷⁹ The experience of the autopsy, too, I would argue, works similarly to Pepperell’s allegorical bullet, albeit in a less visibly perceivable way. Even though we might seem to use the autopsy to insist upon the boundary distinctions between the corpse and the spectator (i.e., “I have the signs of life; that corpse bears the signifiers of death”), the experience in fact renders our boundaries “even less precise.”⁸⁰ In the “Circulation” autopsy episode, for instance, von Hagens at one point comments that he will be able to cut through the ribs of the aged body of his subject with scissors, something, he remarks, would not be possible in an autopsy of his healthy young assistant, spurring an uncomfortable smile from his accomplice as von Hagens perhaps touches too close to reality with his jest.⁸¹ To his audience of primarily body donors, he smiles encouragingly as he quips at the end of the episode, “I hope to see us all plastinated as late as possible.”⁸² In these moments, the autopsy reminds us of our own mortality, that which universally connects us to the cadaver, but it also does more than that. It activates physiological responses in the observer that are materially and immaterially transformative.

Whereas exhibitions of plastinated corpses tend to intentionally stifle sensory input other than the visual, the autopsy in a theatre space is an overwhelmingly sensory experience for the

⁷⁹ 22.

⁸⁰ Phelan has written that “identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other – which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other” (*Unmarked* 13).

⁸¹ “Circulation.”

⁸² “Aging.”

in-house audience (and to some extent, the home viewers of von Hagens' televised autopsies). It is an aural encounter: we hear the sound of the table saw used to slice frozen cadavers in half for demonstrations, the swishing sound of "the general sloshing about of organs" as one observer put it.⁸³ For the in-house spectator, it is also an olfactory experience: it is the inhuming of chemical preservatives and that unmistakable and yet indescribable "smell of death," the whiff of sour urine released when von Hagens' knife cut through the bladder in the brewery autopsy.⁸⁴

Those who perform autopsies and those who watch them often fixate on the bodily sensations that mark the experience. Physician Darin Wolfe describes the moments leading up to an autopsy as defined by a "manic stillness" followed by adrenaline amplifying the physiological responses of his body. "I became aware of my breathing," he writes, "the rushes of warm air crinkling my paper surgical mask, and the thumping of my heart as its pace increased."⁸⁵ In his eyewitness report of von Hagens' first public autopsy, German philosopher Franz Josef Wetz noted the "tingly sense of excitement and [the] pleasant sense of anticipation—a mixture of trepidation and heightened expectation" he felt at the outset of the performance.⁸⁶ But for both Wolfe and Wetz, as well as numerous others who perform or attend autopsies, the endurance of the procedure itself requires a divorcing of emotions from scientific musings. In a truly Cartesian fashion, one must conceive of the body not as a person, but as an empty shell, devoid of the insubstantial essence that had once defined this being, imbuing it with the right to human dignity. Or as Wetz puts it, he needed to convince himself that the inside of the corpse was "not something holy or demonic, but simply something natural" in order for all of his "sensation-

⁸³ Cowell.

⁸⁴ MacDonald 2.

⁸⁵ Wolfe.

⁸⁶ Wetz 296.

seeking voyeurism and comforting horror visions [to melt] away.”⁸⁷ In doing so, he was able to reframe the event as a sober demonstration of scientific prowess and, in fact, found himself surprised by the stark contrast between the “quiet calm” of the observers in the hall and the “emotional and grim debate conducted in the media and in the public” before and after the autopsy.⁸⁸ One can see similar impulses in the body positioning, both conscious and unconscious, of many audience members in von Hagens’ *Autopsy: Life and Death* studio. They sit either reclined slightly back in their seats or leaning slightly forward with a thumb on chin or cheek and another finger on their lips in what most Western viewers would recognize as a contemplative stance. At times, the role of scientific observer seems almost self-consciously performed, and, as in many other performances, social cues to laugh at a joke, applaud, or nod in scientific appreciation at appropriate moments are derived communally.

Just as the *Body Worlds* exhibit garners its apparent authority from its presentation of “real human bodies,” the legitimacy of von Hagens’ autopsies was also dependent on their purported authenticity and immediacy. The theatre, of course, is no stranger to the significance of “liveness.” For many twentieth and twenty-first century thinkers confronted by the threats of media and mediation, the presence of the live body has become theatre’s defining quality and saving grace in a world increasingly drawn to screened entertainment.⁸⁹ In a society so entrenched in media, the endurance of the theatre may quite justifiably depend on this claim to an immediacy that has become so increasingly rare. Ultimately, it is theatre that makes the autopsy possible. The word “autopsy” (meaning “to see for oneself”) reminds us of the *theatron*, the “seeing place.” Indeed, the advertisement for the 2002 brewery autopsy appealed to this

⁸⁷Wetz 296.

⁸⁸Wetz 296.

⁸⁹For example, Peggy Phelan and Matthew Causey. Phillip Auslander’s argument that liveness could only be conceived of after the invention of recorded media was the cause of much debate between the respective camps of Auslander and Phelan.

desire for visual presence, declaring “Now you can witness it yourself.”⁹⁰ For, in the theatre, it becomes palpably evident that human presence is just as physical as it is immaterial; human interiority just as tangible as it is imagined. Gathered in the same room, we take in each other’s essence. We breathe in each other’s exhaled carbon monoxide, sense the heat of each other’s bodies, hear and smell the sounds and scents of others’ digested meals. And in some ways, this seems somehow more invasive than opening our minds to the thoughts of others; welcome or not, our materiality is transformed.

The performances of von Hagens’ autopsies capitalize on this ability to provide audience members with an experience that cannot be achieved through media: the passing of the cadaver’s organs around on a tray during the brewery autopsy, for example, brought the audience tantalizingly close to touching some of the most intimate and nearly always inaccessible parts of the human body. But as the autopsy progressed, the immediacy of the experience became too much for some audience members to tolerate. As the violations of the human body incrementally progressed—from the initial Y-cut incision to the splitting of the skull with a hacksaw—the crowd began to noticeably thin.⁹¹ As in any live performance, the brewery autopsy also had its unexpected moments: when the organs were returned to the empty body, for instance, a piece fell to the floor and was quickly scooped up, spurring a mixture of nervous laughter and muffled gasps of horror in the audience.⁹²

But, as has often been noted by performance theorists, liveness, immediacy, and authenticity are also relative terms: the Old Truman Brewery autopsy was in fact criticized for not being authentic *enough* for the tastes of some medical professionals in the audience. “I regret

⁹⁰ This advertisement also set up the autopsy as being “more real” than even Body Worlds as it explicitly connected Body Worlds to this pronouncement.

⁹¹ D. Cohen.

⁹² D. Cohen.

the body was not fresh,” one of them commented, referring to the fact that the body had been preserved in formaldehyde for eight months; “It [was] like going to Christmas dinner and only getting the leftovers,” complained another.⁹³ A medical student in the audience agreed: “[It] didn’t look real, but it [was] better than nothing.”⁹⁴ This latter comment, however, signifies the appeal of the “live” autopsy and live theatre in general. In other words, the autopsy may not have been deemed to be completely authentic (in the sense that it was not performed immediately after death), but it was still determined to be *more* real than any experience screened technology could provide. This authentic allure of the autopsy indeed lends itself to a compelling spectacle, bringing us as close as possible to the impossible: the ability to gaze within our own bodies.⁹⁵ And yet it is important to recognize that this encounter is always a constructed, theatricalized experience—the authenticity is dependent not upon what is *real*, but upon social and individual *perceptions* of the real.

Indeed, in its various iterations from Galen’s ancient demonstrations to von Hagens’ television specials, the anatomical theatre, despite its claims to scientific authenticity, has always been theatricalized. Its visual spectacle entices the viewer, and its purported authenticity and immediacy adds to its illicit, erotic allure. But, just as with the necrophilic gaze, when this theatricality becomes too palpable in moments of anatomical theatre, it spoils the event. For example, critics of the brewery autopsy argued that it privileged “good television” over authentic pedagogical importance.⁹⁶ Jake Chapman, an artist in attendance, commented, “It’s been very carefully stage managed. I think von Hagens has an idealistic notion that showing bodies will

⁹³ D. Cohen; Greteman.

⁹⁴ D. Cohen.

⁹⁵ Sawday 8. But as Anthony Kubiak notes, that which seems most “authentic” is often the “more hiddenly theatrical” (23).

⁹⁶ Miah.

demystify death, but this was like pornography. Maybe it's his ego that needs dissecting."⁹⁷

These comments reveal that the anatomical theatre works best when it maintains its façade as an “authentic” scientific presentation, thus allowing us to maintain our illusions, but for these critics, von Hagens’ autopsy teetered too far into obvious theatricality.

Contrived death in the anatomical theatre is particularly evident in the televised productions of von Hagens’ *Autopsy: Life and Death* series, which use the visual reactions of in-house audience members to help guide the mediated visual experience of the home viewers. The facial expressions of audience members are frequently highlighted in camera close-ups, revealing a range of expressions from apprehension to excitement to amusement to reservation at appropriate moments. This mechanism also seems intentionally diminished at times: during the initial cuts into the body in the “Circulation” episode, for example, there are no immediate camera cuts to audience reaction.⁹⁸ Whether this is to spare home viewers from reactions of discomfort or disgust that may have manifested on the faces of in-house audience members or to allow them to focus on the visual profundity of such a moment, the visual connection between individual spectator and the body is intentionally isolated. Ultimately, the exhibition space of *Body Worlds* and the autopsy room stifles feeling and artificially constructs our relationships to the corpse. The anonymization of the body (whether plastinate or autopsied corpse) is presented under the guise of protection of privacy, but it also stifles emotion.

Through advancements in medical technology, through exhibitions such as *Body Worlds* and von Hagens’ autopsies, we now have more access than ever to our bodily interiors and yet we protect ourselves from them. The anatomy is, at its very core, a crude reduction of a human life and a fictionalization of death. And there is something deeply and inherently melancholic

⁹⁷ D. Cohen.

⁹⁸ “Circulation.”

about this. Perhaps even something reprehensible, as Curlin warns, “Gazing on dissected human bodies should never be done in a casual fashion;” “things that “should inspire awe are turned into things casual and mundane. Things that would be sorrowed over are turned into things that are intended to pique and satisfy curiosity.”⁹⁹ In fact, it is important to note, as MacDonald has pointed out, that von Hagens’ autopsies are not actually autopsies at all, at least as the term is used in medical investigation. Autopsies are performed to determine the cause of death—to improve the ability of doctors to diagnose and treat, to provide solace to grieving families, to bring murderers to justice. In the case of von Hagen’s autopsies, however, the term “autopsy” is no more than an expediting fiction.¹⁰⁰ Although they have the pedagogical intentions to educate the public about the dangers of poor health habits, von Hagens’ “autopsies” have no medical imperative for their performance (of personal significance to the dead, anyway). The employment of the term “autopsy” instead helps to mitigate and justify the voyeuristic gaze of the public and its illicit instincts in a society that otherwise condemns such urges. The theatricalizing of the autopsy procedure allows for a “suspension of disbelief,” but in this case we are not suspending our disbelief that the body in front of us is truly engaged in its actions, we are suspending our disbelief that humans can engage in such actions and we can watch.

But perhaps the alternative is too much to bear. In prying open death, we are confronted with our own mortality. In dissolving our borders, we are relinquishing humanist notions of self-control. In his *Anatomie generale*, eighteenth century French physician Marie Francois Xavier Bichat suggests to his pupils, “Open up a few corpses: you will dissipate at once the darkness that observation alone could not dissipate.”¹⁰¹ Bichat’s observation may have been intended to be a vote of confidence in dissection’s ability to reveal the scientific truths that are masked by the

⁹⁹ Curlin 60, 62.

¹⁰⁰ MacDonald 4.

¹⁰¹ Qtd. in Foucault 146.

body's exteriors, but the darkness is far from dissipated. Von Hagens' plastinated specimen and autopsied cadavers, like actors bringing "the revelatory message... from the realm of death"¹⁰² are suspended between life and death, calling into question our spatial and temporal limits, and exceeding their very selves in the process. Confronted with the fluidity of the flesh (a word whose linguistic origins denote a filmy, floating covering),¹⁰³ we are challenged by the fluidity of our own borders, the ways in which our bodies are invaded and constructed by other bodies, living and dead, and the fragility of our autonomy. Ultimately, in "[taking] the dead out of their tombs and [putting] them back in society,"¹⁰⁴ von Hagens has inadvertently creates a new sense of interiority amongst his community of spectators, individuals who have now experienced the opening up of the body in an intimate and sensual fashion and whose confidence in their own bodily borders has now been irrevocably shaken.

¹⁰² Taduesz Kantor. Qtd. in Causey 56.

¹⁰³ Elkins 115.

¹⁰⁴ Hirschauer 31.



Figure 18: The "Skin Man." Permission of Gunther von Hagens' BODY WORLDS, Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg, Germany, www.bodyworlds.com.



Figure 19: "Flamenco Female." Permission of Gunther von Hagens' BODY WORLDS, Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg, Germany, www.bodyworlds.com.



Figure 20: Visitors observe a plastinate exhibit in Germany. Photo reprinted by permission of Gunther von Hagens' BODY WORLDS, Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg, Germany, www.bodyworlds.com.

CONCLUSION

“Death Has Always Been With Me”: The Future of the Performative Corpse

In 2011, Gunther von Hagens was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Always a man comfortable with the idea of death, death was now physically taking hold in his body. The toll of the disease is unmistakable in his appearance in *Crucifixion*, a 2012 UK Channel 4 documentary featuring one of von Hagen’s latest and most personal projects.¹ He seems wounded, weighed down by the tremors in his body, and far less energetic than in his televised autopsies of 2005 to 2007. Thus, the project chronicled in *Crucifixion* is one that, given von Hagens’ current phase in life, seems particularly poignant: his dream to create a visceral image of the crucified Christ out of plastinated human arteries, veins, and bones, a dream that, like so many iterations of the performative corpse, is devoted to a narrative of resurrection.²

As posthuman as von Hagens’ anatomical dreams might be, like the anatomists of old, he has always needed material bodies for his projects. In this trajectory of knowing, human bodies are required to understand human bodies. But the technological advances of the cybernetic age have also presented an alternative trajectory for human anatomy, one in which the corporeal body is deemed to be virtually irrelevant to the advancement of scientific knowledge. This anatomical future is epitomized in enterprises such as the Visible Human Project, which, along with other digitizations of the human body such as the Human Genome Project, anatomizes select sacrificial bodies into their most miniscule parts so that these bodies can be resurrected as

¹ Von Hagens has said, “For me this is the finest and most difficult project I have ever undertaken. I have never put in a comparable amount of artistic thought and I think it is my best ever piece of work” (von Hagens).

² Technically, the project does not contain any human tissue. It is being created by pumping the veins and arteries of donated cadavers with plastic and then dissolving the bodies away in acid, leaving only the plastic cast. The project also uses plastic casts of bones instead of real ones.

digital specters, entities that can then be employed to model all human bodies, presumably without the need for future anatomies.³

Like the early modern anatomical theatres, the Visible Human Project began with a criminal body. When the idea for the VHP arose in 1986, a committee was established to find the ideal sacrificial body, a proverbial Everyman for the digital universe. It found it in August 1993 in 39-year-old Paul Jernigan, a Texan prisoner executed by lethal injection for burglary and murder. Before his death, Jernigan had been persuaded by a prison chaplain to donate his body to science, an elective sacrifice to atone for his earthly sins.⁴ If Jernigan had been executed in 1600 London, he might have been subjected to a crude evisceration by the anatomists in the Barber-Surgeon's Anatomical Theatre. A twenty-first century man, however, he was systematically scanned by CT and MRI machines, frozen in gelatin, and grinded into 1 mm sections that were meticulously photographed.⁵ This procedure, in effect, completely dissolved away his body; each thin slice of human material crumbling to dust after its use.⁶ But once these photographs were reassembled as a three-dimensional digital model, Jernigan was raised to eternal life as the Visible Man, a virtual "Adam" for a new age.⁷ He lives on, bare life⁸ on a perpetual stage, every orifice, every organ accessible to the public and made to perform at will. Through software

³ "Visible Human Project."

⁴ Waldby 14. As Catherine Waldby notes, the selection of Jernigan's body provided the media with "a set of stock narratives and an appealing moral economy of criminal transgression, punishment, sacrifice, and redemption which produced headlines like 'Executed man helps science as internet cadaver', 'Executed killer reborn as visible man on internet' and 'A convict's contribution'" (Waldby 1). David L. Wheeler's article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* calls Jernigan an "Internet angel" (Wheeler).

⁵ Slavin 638; Waldby 14.

⁶ Waldby 14.

⁷ Newspaper headlines frequently referred to the Visible Man as a "digital Adam," and later the Visible Woman as a "digital Eve" (Cartwright 29; Waldby 22).

⁸ "Bare life" in the sense Agamben uses it: a body that is excluded from the state and yet the acceptable target of its violence and use (see Agamben).

developed from his dataset, his “heart can be made to beat, the veins to bleed, the flesh to bruise and lacerate.”⁹

Two years later, in 1995, the Visible Man was given his eternally wedded partner: a Visible Woman,¹⁰ a 59-year old anonymous “Maryland housewife” who was donated to the project by her husband after her death. Lacking a biography, she did not present the press with the same opportunities for compelling narratives that Jernigan and his story of criminal redemption did. Instead, she seems rather reminiscent of the women of nineteenth century freak shows, forced into a visible afterlife by her showmen: her husband and the researchers of the project. Already marked as “passive matter,” her contribution to the human race seemed to be expected, rather than heroic.¹¹ Despite the fact that the dataset of the Visible Woman presented a technological improvement upon the Visible Man (she was able to be sliced and photographed in 0.33 mm segments, allowing for a higher-resolution model), it is Jernigan’s dataset that is still used with far greater frequency in medical and scientific study.¹² Thus, the VHP reproduces many of the gendered narratives that have governed the anatomical theatre from its inception: The male body acts as the universal norm, and the female is of interest primarily for her reproductive organs.¹³ Indeed, the Visible Woman’s subordinate status was actually heightened by the fact that, in this sense, she seems to have let the virtual family down. As a postmenopausal body, the Visible Woman has been deemed an inadequate representation of womanhood. Consequently, the National Library of Medicine has expressed a desire to scan a younger female cadaver as well as an infant to fill this gap left by this aging “Internet housewife.”¹⁴

⁹ Waldby 16.

¹⁰ The Visible Human Project calls them the Visible Human Male and Visible Human Female.

¹¹ Waldby 54.

¹² Waldby 54.

¹³ Waldby 16-17, 54; Cartwright 29-31.

¹⁴ Waldby 18; Cartwright 30.

Like all anatomical theatres, the VHP fulfills a public desire for access to the corpse, this time for a cybernetic age. It brings a visibility to the processes of human dissection that had largely been ushered behind the closed doors of medical institutions during the twentieth century, unleashing it once again into public discourse. Despite their lack of materiality, the bodies of the VHP have been advertised and praised for their “authenticity.” The Visible Man and the Visible Woman are widely regarded as the “closest medicine has come to creating accurate and detailed virtual bodies.”¹⁵ And like the cast of Saartjie Baartman’s body or von Hagen’s plastinates, they present a sanctioned act of pornography, a “fantasy object for medicine” for, as Catherine Waldby writes, “pornographic and medical genres frequently converge around the quest for a maximized bodily visibility.”¹⁶

But the bodies of the VHP, like all socially-constructed dead bodies, are profoundly mediated cadavers; their corporeal origins fading in memory as quickly as their frozen limbs were obliterated into nothingness. Just as in other moments of anatomical theatre, these bodies were dismembered so that new bodies, new conceptions of death, could be formed. Thus, the VHP becomes implicated in the need for medico-scientific discourse to repress natural death and decay and provide, in place of the cadaver, a reanimated body, a performative corpse. As Waldby notes:

Just as Da Vinci’s ratiocinative anatomies have served as icons for humanist knowledge and technical modernity, so the Visible Human Project has been taken up as a new iconography of ‘Man’ for the virtual future, a future in which all content, even the mysterious materiality of the human body, can be hyper-mediated, transported and traversed by the computer.¹⁷

But, as with other digital bodies, this Visible Man and Woman are tempered and muted by the sensory deprivation of the technological interface, which allows for controlled sight, but short

¹⁵ Waldby 25.

¹⁶ Waldby 8.

¹⁷ Waldby 4.

circuits the other senses. The highly visible nature of their bodily interiors indeed provides us with profound visual access to their depths, but we cannot touch them; we cannot smell their decay. They have been contained and sterilized; idealized, not abjected; dry, not fluid. In an age in which autopsies are becoming increasingly infrequent and in which many medical schools have deemed dissection labs to be unnecessary with the advent of new technologies such as the VHP, we must wonder what will become of our conceptions of our bodies—for our corporeality can momentarily be absented, but it cannot be erased.

It is this crucial concern that brings us back to von Hagens and his crucifixion project. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, numerous scientists have sought to understand the biomechanics of Christ's death upon the cross. In the 1930s, Pierre Barbet conducted a series of crucifixion experiments in which he nailed corpses to crosses in an attempt to determine the true nature of Christ's crucifixion.¹⁸ From Barbet, we have received the most popular theory that Jesus must have died by asphyxiation, after repeated cycles of lifting his body to breath and then collapsing from exhaustion until he could no longer support his lungs.¹⁹ Frederick Zugibe, an expert in forensic medicine, sought to disprove this theory, studying the issue by pinning live humans to a cross in his laboratory (driving the nails through special gloves rather than flesh) and monitoring their vital signs and muscle strain. From his research, Zugibe determined that breathing would not have been a problem for a crucified individual and hypothesized that Jesus died from cardiac and respiratory arrest brought on by hypovolemic and traumatic shock.²⁰ In a further interesting convergence of theology and science, the Visible Human Project has also been brought in to test the crucifixion. Victor Spitzer, one of the lead scientists on the project has used the VHP to drive a digital Roman nail through the virtual hands

¹⁸ Barbet.

¹⁹ Barbet 75-6.

²⁰ Zugibe 130-131.

and feet of the Visible Man to determine the nerve damage and pain such an injury would inflict. Using the VHP, Spitzer determined that the palms (rather than the wrists, as some believe) would have been the most painful, and therefore the most enticing, location to put a nail.²¹ And thus, like medieval religious figures who crafted their bodies in imitation of Christ, like early modern criminals who were instructed to compare their gibbets to the Cross, Jernigan is brought into a trajectory of sacrificial bodies that extends back to the earliest Christian tradition.

These crucifixion experiments, which make use of both live bodies and corpses (in addition to the digital body of the Visible Man) tell us just how much we need the body—physically, emotionally, spiritually. Zugibe relies on his human volunteers; Von Hagens, as well, requires the bodies of numerous dismembered volunteers to remember Christ’s body. He has declared that his “Jesus is intended to be as real as possible without being real. I’d say he is authentically real [...] A Jesus that is closer to humankind than ever before.”²² For von Hagens, a declared atheist lacking any religious motivation for his project, the idealized incorrupt corpse is a plastinate, and, for him, this is somehow “closer to humankind” than the corporeal man who once lived. And so again, as much as its materiality draws us in, the true corpse retreats behind the curtain: the constructions and narratives we layer over death.

Von Hagens is aware he is running out of time; the “clock is ticking” and this is a project he may never see to its conclusion, and this makes it all the more urgent.²³ His wife and son have asked him to stop. He has been condemned and ridiculed by friends and strangers for his vision; his project has been deemed to surpass Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* in its blasphemy. Yet he persists. On the Day of the Dead, in the middle of a graveyard, von Hagens gives a partial answer to the *Crucifixion* film crew as to his motivation for the work. As a six-year-old, he

²¹ *Quest for Truth: The Crucifixion*.

²² von Hagens.

²³ von Hagens; *Crucifixion*.

recalls, he was hit on the head by an iron door. He remembers being pushed into the operating theatre and, just before the ether took hold, the doctors telling his mother he wouldn't make it. When he opened his eyes after the surgery, he says it felt like a new birth. Von Hagens believes it was this experience that made him lose his fear of death at a very young age, for as he tells the interviewer, his eyes filled with tears, "Death has always been with me."²⁴

For a man battling the bodily devastation of Parkinson's, the crucifixion project is a way for von Hagens to represent one of the most important figures who has ever lived "as if he had been frozen in time, between death and decay, ever since the moment he was nailed to the cross."²⁵ However we might feel about his controversial treatment of the human body, perhaps we can empathize with the compulsion that urges him on: a quest for immortality. "This Jesus will last long after my death and say 'built by von Hagens,'" he insists. All is vanity.

From medieval pilgrims to Gunther von Hagens, millions of humans have sought transcendence and an understanding of death through the construction of performative corpses. Both the Visible Human Project and von Hagens' crucifixion project, in their own ways, stem from the same desire to evade the unbearable natural course of death by finding meaning in its performance. In his mid-twentieth century essay "The Question Concerning Technology," Martin Heidegger had portended a rather dystopian future for such a society that is able to construct its dead with technology. Such a world allows human bodies to be drawn upon as "standing reserve," the full employment of Foucauldian biopower, bringing humankind to "the very brink of a precipitous fall."²⁶ In its new digital manifestations, the body threatens to fall beyond its limits.²⁷ Arguably, however, human beings in their death-defying encores as

²⁴ *Crucifixion*.

²⁵ von Hagens.

²⁶ Heidegger 27.

²⁷ It is perhaps appropriate that the word "cadaver" finds its etymological origin in *cadere* ("to fall"). See Kristeva 3.

performative corpses have always been conceived of in this way. For Heidegger—and von Hagens as well, who states that he hopes his Jesus project will inspire global “contemplative reflection”—it is human thought that can save us.²⁸ As Cartesian in nature as this instinct might be, when it is attached to an intimate relationship with the sensations of the body, when it is felt in both body and mind in somatic engagement with an opened corpse, it compels us to consider what precisely it is we are making out of our lives and deaths and how we are drawing upon the bodies of others in our own vain quests for self-preservation. Medico-scientific discourse might seek to suppress such engagement with human reserves of corpse matter, but, as I hope this project has indicated, once unrepressed, our encounters with the bodies of the anatomy theatre call for a recognition of the opened wounds of both corpse and self—for a conscious remembering of the once-dismembered.

²⁸ Von Hagens; Heidegger 33-35.

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