The body in question

W. F. Bynum

The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture. By Jonathan Sawday. *Routledge: 1995. Pp. 327. £35, $45.*
Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England. By Carole Rawcliffe. *Alan Sutton: 1995. Pp. 241. £25, $45.*

ANY medical student can vouch for the way in which the first few lessons in dissection become etched on the memory. Even with gross anatomy being whittled down in curriculum time, and the advent of newer teaching aids that do not rely on touching a corpse, dissection is still part of the acculturation of the would-be doctor. For centuries, anatomy was considered to be the queen of the medical sciences, but dissection more than any other activity was intimately connected in the public mind with all that was disreputable about medical students. Ruth Richardson's *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (1988) examined the decades surrounding the passage in Britain of the 1832 Anatomy Act; now, Jonathan Sawday's *The Body Emblazoned* analyses the era of Andreas Vesalius and after. In the years between these two fine monographs, 'the body' has become a fashionable object of historical enquiry.

Sawday approaches his topic as a cultural historian, and although most of the 32 striking plates are taken from anatomical works of his period, he is as much concerned with the language of the poetry of John Donne, Edmund Spenser and Phineas Fletcher as with the anatomical works of Vesalius and Charles Estienne, and with humanistic conceptions of the microcosm as with the functional designs of the anatomy theatres in Padua and Leiden. It is one of the strengths of his study that the obverse is equally true: in this dissection of the culture of science, neither the science nor the culture gets short-changed.

In Greek mythology, Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon, was beheaded by Perseus. Her severed head could still turn to stone anyone who looked at it. The Medusan myth pops up repeatedly in Sawday's volume, as a reminder of the power of dismembered parts and of the latent (or explicit) eroticism in much Renaissance anatomical illustration. Because executed criminals were a main source of supply, women's bodies were especially prized. Female felons could plead the belly, which made pregnant corpses even more valuable. Vesalius is dissecting a pregnant woman in the famous frontispiece of *De Humani Corporis fabrica*, and a number of Sawday's other illustrations depict mother and fetus.

If Greek mythology provided evidence of the residual power of the dismembered part, Renaissance anatomists first systematically confronted the contrast between the exterior and interior of the human body, and the fact that internal organs are just as individualized as faces and external shapes. Sawday minutely examines the Renaissance tradition of illustrating dissected bodies as if they were still alive, relating this to beliefs about the intimacy of mind and body in the pre-Cartesian world. The triumph of the mechanical worldview in the seventeenth century punctured the convention; he argues that only with Sigmund Freud and James Joyce was the older monist position cogently articulated for the modern world. Significantly, Joyce's *Ulysses* — a 'somatic epic' — took some of its inspiration from Fletcher's *The Purple Island* (1633), a once-famous anatomical poem suffused with the mind–body monism of Hippocratic humoralism.

Even the title of Sawday's monograph links the anatomical with the literary. To emblazon is to celebrate, glorify or praise, as well as to depict heraldically. Several of his anatomical illustrations incorporate heraldic motifs, and both French and English poetical traditions of the period emblazoned female beauty. Nor was it happenstance that literature and anatomy shared a common concern with theatres, spaces where drama was enacted. Renaissance drama, poetry, philosophy and anatomy sought an identical end: *nosce teipsum* — know thyself. To which anatomy added: *nascentes morimur* — we are born to die.

The dustjacket of Sawday's book assures us that his writing is free of jargon. One person's jargon is another person's professional language. Those coming to his book from anatomy may not find his prose as limpid as that which the founders of the Royal Society advocated, but his pages are so full of insight that the effort is rewarded.

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Flayed figure from Valverde's Spanish anatomy textbook of 1556, depicting the Marsyas and Apollo myth.

By contrast, the hardest bits of Carole Rawcliffe's erudite synthesis in *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* are the long quotations in old English. They make scanning difficult, even while serving to reinforce the fact that she is surveying a lost world. Anatomy barely gets a mention, as Rawcliffe examines the ways in which individuals in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries coped with the uncertainties of existence in this vale of tears. A fine series of illustrations, including 20 in colour, provide more than just decorative attraction to her text, which makes wonderful use of poignant anecdote. Individual chapters on the principal medical orders (physicians, surgeons and apothecaries) are complemented by discussions of women, midwives, the occult, religion and therapy. She enters fully into the values of the society she dissects, explaining why, for instance, prophylactic bloodletting in the spring and autumn could be valued. Monks would have queued up for it, because the ritual surrounding it meant that they got a few days resting in the infirmary, with a full diet. Sweatings, clysters and purges also had their rationales; so did swaddling newborns.

The nature of sources for understanding health and disease five centuries ago means that Rawcliffe must cast a wide net. Like Sawday, she is not afraid to use literary or theological writings; like him, she demonstrates how impoverished will be the history of medicine if it relies solely on the testimony of doctors. Both volumes eloquently demonstrate the buoyancy of the discipline. □

W. F. Bynum is at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE, UK.