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Hurren ET. *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse: Staging Post-Execution Punishment in Early Modern England*. Basingstoke (UK): Palgrave Macmillan; 2016.

PART II: PREAMBLE

The Beauties of the Magazines (1762)

Do not ye prudes pretend to dread reading any further, lest you should meet with some wanton descriptions that might alarm your sensibilities; and you should be so shocked at such obscene writing, that you could not think of anything else... But to satisfy, or speak more honestly, to dissatisfy you, in this work there will not be those common place pictures, or descriptions, that only tend to make weak minds yet weaker; this work being intended a DISSECTION OF THE MIND, to lay nature naked to view.

Charles Bissett MD on Putrefaction, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, (1766)

I put the blood contained in the right auricle and ventricle of the heart, the bile that was taken out of the gall bladder, and the tainted bilious humour that collected in the duodenum into separate galley-pots; these I covered with a loose paper; and placed them on a shelf in the surgery... in order to observe their progress to putrefaction... In two hours a very small proportion of blood serum separated... At the sixth hour, several maggots were moving upon its surface... At the eighteenth from the... death, it had a disagreeable smell, and fetid putrefaction...²

A Colloquy between the Gallows and the Hangman: The Evils of Execution (eighteenth century)

Museums enriched and collections enlarged:
With relics of murder and blood overcharged
And often these scenes are dressed up for the stage
And the votaries of pleasure and fashion engage
There, in all its grim horrors, the tragical³ sight,
Is enacted, afforded unbounded delight!

In the winter of 1815, John Keats, an aspiring Romantic poet, was a young medical student in his early twenties doing the rounds of the dissection rooms of London. At night he wrote about a secretive anatomical world where all living things were cut open:

[...] skeletons of man,
Of beast, behemoth, and leviathan,
And elephant, and eagle, and huge jaw
Of nameless monster. [...]
The gulping whale was like a dot in the spell,
Yet look upon it, and'twould size and swell
To its huge self; and the minutest fish
Would pass the very hardest gazer's wish,
And shew his little eye's anatomy.

*Endymion, IIII.*⁴

These private pursuits were costly on his emotional well-being and financial capabilities. The young poet could not fund the medical fees from his writings. Keats's mother had to pay on his behalf Guy's hospital fees, a '£1 2s administration charge' and another '£25 4s' required to 'register for twelve months as a surgeon's pupil'. This would enable him to train for six months on the hospital wards to obtain enough experience to be examined by the Royal Society of Apothecaries. The longer term plan was to then study with the Royal College of Surgeons as an apprentice. Keats was hence one of '159 students that paid ten guineas for a course on *Anatomy and the Operations of Surgery* taught by Mr Astley Cooper and Mr Henry Cline' in 1815–6. Both were very skilled surgeons yet experts in different forms of dissection, as Robert Gittings explains: 'Cline was reckoned the soundest and most mechanically ingenious⁶ of operating surgeons, Cooper the boldest, most dashing and experimental' when working on the living and the dead.

Often each gave evidence in high profile murder cases in which expert medical testimony was required to convict the prisoner of homicide at the Old Bailey courtroom, next door to the Company of Barbers and Surgeons in the City of London. Keats kept a detailed medical notebook of the available dissections he paid to see. In it, he wrote, that he was struck by Cooper's audacious speculations about whether or not 'Blood possesses Vitality [and how arteries] expel Blood in the last struggles of Life'.⁸ He also drew two skulls, almost certainly criminal ones, in the margins of his note-taking. Later what he learnt from those *peri-mortem* bodies delivered for dissection emerged in his poetic musings as: 'This living hand, now warm and capable'. After Keats became a qualified apothecary his nocturnal adventures stood him in good stead. He took up the position of surgical dresser in the operating theatre of Guy's hospital. There, he learnt that human vivisection was commonplace.

In eighteenth-century England, surgical operations were harrowing experiences because alcohol and laudanum could only dull the pain for the patient before the discovery of modern anaesthetics. On returning home at night exhausted Keats wrote about how: 'Full many a dreary hour have I past/ My Brain bewildered/ and Mind o'er cast/ With heaviness'.⁹ It was a cheerless task to work long hours on the wards and at nightfall have to venture out to pay hard earned cash to watch penal surgeons working on rotting bodies taken from the gallows. The medical fraternity tried to take advantage of how contemporaries thought that the condemned polluted early modern society with a sinfulness that the redemptive nature of social justice could not remedy alone. The English state, anxious and guilt-ridden by its inability to prevent the 'horrible crime of murder', had to rely on medicine to lance—literally and figuratively—the canker of homicide.¹⁰ Part II of this book is consequently all about the sorts of anatomical settings this happened in, the surgical men present in the dissection room, and the medico-legal circumstances surrounding criminal corpses actually delivered and then cut up to 'harm' them under the Murder Act.

Each chapter that follows reflects one of three vantage points that have been neglected in the historical literature. Their themes have been identified from the source material cited on the opening page of Part II. The key gaps in our knowledge are—the shock to the sensibilities of seeing actual dissections—the medical reality of decaying flesh putrefying to be cut up—and the material collections that were created from macabre criminal work. Hence, Chapter 4 examines how the condemned was actually cut open and the extent to which procedures changed over time under the capital legislation. Then, Chapter 5 investigates the locations where criminal cadavers actually became available for dissection and how punishment venues differed in the capital compared to provincial life. The punishment journey of the condemned concludes with Chapter 6's assessment of the types of original research that took place and how specimen-taking created a medical museum culture displaying criminal afterlives.

Essentially, then, *Dissecting the Criminal Corpse* utilises John Keats's experiences at St Guy's dissection room in London and others like it in English regional society. The overall aim is to rediscover whether first-hand accounts written by famous surgeons like Sir William Osler who cut open criminal corpses in front of the would-be poet, can be relied on, or not:

On entering the room, the stink was most abominable...The pupils carved them [limbs and bodies] apparently, with as much pleasure, as they would carve their dinners. One, was pouring Ol.Terebinth [oil of turpentine used normally as a purgative but here as a crude preservative] on his subject, & amused himself with striking his scalpel at the maggots, as they issued from their retreats; here, were five or six who had served but a three years apprenticeship, most vehemently exclaiming against that regulation in the Apothecary's bill, which obliges everyone to serve five years.¹¹

To what extent this medical commentary was representative of punishment experiences, ritual methods, and spatial settings, in *all* of early modern England, remains open to historical dispute. The time has then come to delve inside dissection room doors opened up to the public by the Murder Act, still awaiting their rediscovery in the archives.

Contents

4. Delivering Post-Mortem 'Harm': Cutting the Corpse
5. Mapping Punishment: Provincial Places to Dissect
6. The Disappearing Body: Dissection to the Extremities
7. 'He that Hath an Ill-Name Is Half-Hanged': The Anatomical Legacy of the Criminal Corpse

Footnotes

- 1 Editorial. *The Beauties of the Magazines* selected including the several original comic pieces selected to be continued the Middle of every Month. London: Waller publishers; 1762. p. 8.
- 2 Bissett Charles. *Medical Essays and Observations*. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Thompson Publishers; 1766. pp. 60–61.
- 3 *A Colloquy between the Gallows and the Hangman: The Evils of Execution* was an anti-capital punishment poem published by Albert Mildane in London in 1851 looking back at the long eighteenth-century practices.
- 4 Stillinger Jackd, editor. *John Keats: The Complete Poems*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press; 1978. pp. 116–118.
- 5 Roe Nicholas. *John Keats*. New Haven: Yale University Press; 2012. p. 74.
- 6 Gittings Robert. *John Keats, Physician and Poet*. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 1973;Vol. 223:51–55. quote at p. 53. [PubMed: 4570144]
- 7 Keats John. *Anatomical and Physiological Notebook*. 1st edition. New York: Haskell House Publishers; 1934.
- 8 Roe. Keats. :80.
- 9 Ibid., p. 95
- 10 See, for context McKenna A. *God's Tribunal: Guilt, Innocence, and Execution in England, 1675–1775*. *Cultural and Social History*. 2006;III:121–144.
- 11 Gittings. *John Keats, Physician and Poet*. :54.

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