

THE SECRETS OF WOMEN: GENDER, GENERATION AND THE ORIGINS OF HUMAN DISSECTION

Katharine Park

History of Science/Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality

Harvard University

My book-in-progress traces the development of human autopsy and dissection in Italian texts and images from the late thirteenth through the mid-sixteenth centuries. The first three chapters focus on practices that involved opening the human body both inside and outside the context of university instruction: not only autopsy and dissection, but also embalming and Caesarean birth. They highlight the prominence of female bodies in this arena, and they argue that the practices in question, together with the preference for female bodies, reflected a strong interest in genealogy and the processes of generation, taken in both literal and metaphorical senses. The last two chapters use this material to recontextualize the work of academic anatomists, notably Jacopo Berengario da Carpi, at the university of Bologna, and Andreas Vesalius, at the university of Padua.

Introduction

Surveys late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century practices involving the opening of the human body, with special attention to their nature and origins as revealed in the contemporary terminology. Traces the development of a persistent historiographical myth concerning the existence of putative religious or social “taboos” against autopsy and dissection in traditional Christian culture, arguing rather that autopsy and dissection were rooted in the funerary practice of embalming and religious practices focused on the cult of the Christian saints. Understanding this expanded context helps to make sense of the prominence of women as objects of autopsy and dissection, as reflected in contemporary book illustration.

1. *Holy Anatomies*

Focuses on the two best documented early cases of episodes involving the opening of the human body: the embalming and inspection of the corpses of the holy women Chiara of Montefalco (d. 1308) and Margherita of Città di Castello (d. 1320).

2. *The Secrets of Women*

Discusses Latin and vernacular medical and natural philosophical writing on female anatomy and physiology in northern and central Italy in the period between the late thirteenth and the late fifteenth centuries, together with the related tradition of anatomical illustration. Places this in the context of contemporary ideas concerning the gendered nature of knowledge, both male and female.

3. *The Mother's Part*

Analyzes the management of childbirth and the practice of Caesarean section and autopsy among laywomen in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Florence, as described in letters, diaries, and notarial documents. Argues that these reflect lay views of generation and assumptions concerning the role of mothers in generation that are not wholly congruent with learned ideas.

4. *The Evidence of the Senses*

Discusses the growing role of anatomical and medical expertise in evaluating the autopsies of holy women in the early sixteenth century, focusing principally on Bologna and on the figures of Elena Duglioli Dall'Olio and Jacopo Berengario da Carpi, professor of surgery and author of the first highly illustrated printed anatomy book before Vesalius. Discusses the images of female anatomy in Berengario's *Commentaria* (1521).

5. *The Empire of Anatomy*

Beginning with the iconography of Vesalius's titlepage, analyzes the secular counter-narrative used by Vesalius to refashion the figures of anatomy and the anatomist, recasting them in terms of the mythical history of the Roman Empire and the lineage of Julius Caesar, which had its origins in the opening of Caesar's mother and its end in the opening of Nero's.

Conclusion: From the Secrets of Women to the Secrets of Nature

Examines the emergence of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century metaphor of the natural inquirer as seeking secrets contained inside the naked body of a personified female Nature. Argues that this reflects a completely new tradition

of personification, and that it must be understood in the light of contemporary ideas concerning the female body and the natural order, not as a trope for the methods or the goals of "modern science."

