

Dissecting Anatomy

The long held beliefs that human dissection was taboo and that it was fundamentally used as a means of displaying God's creating are challenged by Katherine Park and Andrew Cunningham, respectively. Both Park and Cunningham explore the rise of practices human dissection and anatomizing in the early modern period. Their different focal points notwithstanding, if the works of Andreas Vesalius can be viewed as common sources for each, then it is easily argued that Cunningham's work is at once a chronological continuation, of sorts, to Park's work. That is not to say that the two are proposing the same idea, quite the contrary. Park shows that dissection moved into University practice and was the accepted authority on causes of death requested by dying mothers. Conversely, Cunningham views the "renaissance" of anatomy as more a "resurrection" of the earliest forms of human dissection in which the questions of soul and to reveal things such as where the spirit is formed and that the human body is a microcosm of the universe. Continuation of not, essentially, Cunningham pulls the scalpel from the humanist hands of Park's 'Alexandrian' and University anatomists.

Park's *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* explores the idea that dissections moved out of the medical circle and practiced for alternative ends such as proving a closeness with God, or some similar idea. In other cases, dissections occurred as a byproduct of a caesarian birth in which the mother died, or at the desire of family after one's death in order to better understand the cause of death. Park ends with a discussion of the famous frontispiece of Vesalius' work. She views Vesalius as a bridge from the later medieval anatomy to the early renaissance regularity of human dissection.

If Vesalius is the bridge, Andrew Cunningham's *The Anatomical Renaissance: The Resurrection of Anatomical projects of the Ancients* stands on romantically on the edge and plunges into the confused

torment below. While claiming that the 'rebirth' or 'resurrection' of anatomy stems around the actual hands on aspect of human dissection (an Aristotelian perspective), he constantly puts the goals of anatomy into realm of "divine" and using it as a means of explaining the universe in miniature, as well as showing the marvels of God's creation (a pointedly *un*-Aristotelian perspective). He then delves into explaining alignment with some anatomical theories to the Reformation, or at least anti-papal realms.

Understanding the motives and intention of Cunningham's anatomists are less defined than the ones in Parks work. The issue with this stems from both Cunningham and Park using the same anatomists. Both the author's chose their central figures for their prowess in anatomy. This works well in *Secrets of Women* where the idea of growing body of knowledge and understanding the physical human body is paramount. The same choices do not translate well for Cunningham as there is no abundance of information on the religious or other beliefs of the anatomists.

The two works are contemporary in subject and characters only. They are not counterpoints against each other per se, but reveal the complexity with which anatomy and human dissection grew during its adolescence. When studied together, Park's work seeks to pull human dissection from the novelty of proving divine relationships within holy settings (and bodies) into the realm of health and knowledge structurally studied and reviewed by physicians and in universities. Cunningham seeks to frame the physical act of human dissection with the ancients and put anatomy's birth back into the hands of those who were attempting to explain thing which were not physical. Park's argument is stronger and easier to follow than many of the postulations that Cunningham presents. When two works can attribute different genesis to the same phenomena using the same prominent players the decision must be based on clarity of argument and lucidity. In this case Katherine Park proves much more adept at presenting the case for a 'scientific' beginning to the popularity of human dissection and anatomy when compared to Cunningham's 'religious' hypothesis.