

## Reseñas

Linda Kalof, ed. **A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age (A Cultural History of the Human Body, 2)**. Oxford and New York: Berg; 2010, 295 p. ISBN: 9781847887894. £ 60 (Hardback). New edition: London: Bloomsbury; 2014, 312 p. ISBN: 9781472554635. £ 20 (Paperback).

Some twenty-five years have elapsed since the emergence of «the body» as a lively focus of inquiry, and as a platform for cross-disciplinary dialogue that draws to a common ground scholars of literature, religion, philosophy, history of medicine, culture, psychology, anthropology, archaeology and more. Now the six-volume series *A Cultural History of the Human Body* makes a first attempt to both summarize the hundreds of books and essays published in recent years in this field of the History of the Body, and calls for its recognition as a coherent sub-discipline within History. Judging by the second volume dedicated to the Middle Ages, the enterprise of the series (all the books are identically structured) is successful in providing a broad survey as well as an intelligent sample of the main topics relevant to the field, the important scholars engaged today in studying it, and the up-to-date research that has contributed to the development of the field in recent years. Anyone teaching the history of medieval medicine or general medieval cultural history will now have a well produced, jargon-free book of reference which should serve their students as the starting point for any inquiry in the field. The general reader as well as the curious student will be able to consult the useful subject index as a guide to the richness of the themes relevant to the study of the body within medieval culture. The rich bibliography will guide her to further reading, and the illustrations accompanying the text will hint at the importance of iconographic sources in this particular field. The ten essays that form this collection show how valuable and fruitful it is for the historian to examine his/her period through the substrate of the body, its parts, and its elements. Such an examination not only leads to asking new questions and discovering hitherto neglected parts and objects in human history, it also allows us to compare different cultures, different societies, and different moments in time through the lens of the body.

Looming above the book are three essays by Monica Green: the lucid introduction and two chapters (7 and 8), which are dedicated to bodies as markers of difference (in particular between the sexes and among the diverse groups inhabiting the world). Green explores the most essential bodily difference—sex, and the discussion leads her to touch other related themes such as the evil eye, menstruation (also among men), hermaphroditism, various disabilities, and the tools for deciphering and representing difference (physiognomy and clothing). Her discussion of the diversity of humankind aims to answer the intriguing question whether there was a medieval concept of race. It covers the environmental and climatic theories in ancient and medieval natural philosophy determining bodily and psychological differences among people from different regions, the image as well as idea of the black with particular reference to the perception of the sexual behaviour and the superior quality of breast milk of the black woman, monstrous races at the edges of the world and beyond, and the general theological concern about how to define human identity. Green adamantly maintains that by the end of the Middle Ages, Christian notions of the diversity of humankind had come to contain ideas that inherited biological differences, whether apparent on the surface of the body or not, should be used to structure social relations.

Katharine Park opens the collection with a sweeping survey of the cycle of life from birth to death as a corporeal process at whose centre lies the body. Her survey of medieval beliefs concerning birth (infant baptism as well as various birth rituals) and death (burial practices, good or bad death, attitudes and sensibilities regarding cadavers and dissections), held by both laypeople and learned authorities, clearly shows the variations over time, space, and social as well as ethnic and religious circumstances.

Ann Carmichael reconstructs in her essay the larger material world which determined the medieval experience of health and disease, and shaped the corporeal perception that evolved from the early to the late Middle Ages. From monastic diet and the revolution in agricultural production around the year 1000 to aristocratic extravagant consumption of meat, from changes in the rural and urban landscapes to the problem of recurring famine, from St. Anthony's Fire through leprosy and plague — food, environment and disease had profound social and cultural implications far outstripping demography as they practically transformed medieval bodies again and again in a plurality of ways.

Ruth Mazo Karras and Jacqueline Murray survey the manifold and varied medieval attitudes to the sexed and particularly the sexual body (that is, its role in sexual activity). Sex differences, same-sex relations, sodomy, adultery,

prostitutes, impotence, contraception, chastity, virginity, varied religious sensibilities to sex and its regulation (both secular and ecclesiastical) are some of the themes discussed in this chapter, which shows how in a world where the body was the marker of humanity, to be human was to be embodied. This made the way one experienced that body's sexual pleasures, or repressed its sexual desires, central to the experience of being human. This impacted on the way one talked or thought about Christ incarnate, whose bodily presence became central in religious and spiritual discourses. Christian views and beliefs about sex and sexualities also heavily relied on medical and natural philosophical substrates which were often blended into the religious or spiritual discourse.

The most original of the essays in this collection is Fernando Salmon's chapter «The Body Inferred: Knowing the Body through the Dissection of Texts». It masterfully unravels the case of the scholastic discourse on the eye as a representation of the method adopted to approach the body through texts as well as the way thirteenth-century learned medicine produced new and ever more complex knowledge about the body's structure, function, and dysfunction by commenting on and analysing canonic texts and not through seeing or gazing at the body (notwithstanding the fact that the direct observation of the body through anatomical dissection emerged gradually from the thirteenth century onwards). In a holistic medical system such as that based on humoralism, seeing the inside was both a technical impossibility and a useless aim. Medical knowledge about the body in the Middle Ages was therefore based not in the corpse or in images but in words. Unseen structures were given material plausibility by logical inference and only limited visualisation, not by recourse to experiments.

Anke Bernau discusses the means whereby spiritual or airy bodies (angels or demons) move between the heaven and the natural world of humans and interact with human bodies, sometimes through deception and sexual intercourse. While Montserrat Cabré studies how medieval men and particularly women endeavoured to maintain the beauty of their bodies on the basis of concepts (such as the notion of beauty as harmony) and techniques occasionally borrowed from Islamic neighbours. She places much weight on discussions of medieval cosmetics, a unique genre of sources where female authority and women's authorship thrived.

The two essays closing this collection introduce the representations of medieval bodies in fiction and art. Samantha Riches and Bettina Bildhauer analyse the religious imagery which stressed the role of the body as a locus of salvation. Through this, laypeople could think about their own and others' body

as a potential route to salvation that did not entail priestly mediation. In such discourse the body appeared as a locus of identity. Its external boundaries were constantly negotiated (in debates about wounds, healing, growth, change, and transformation) and it underwent cycles of fragmentation and reassembly. The Martyrs' body, the physical body of Christ and the physical body of Mary, Adam's body, the mystics' corporeal fantasies, corporeal integrity and various forms of imitating Christ —these are but a few of the themes which filled spiritual representation in the later Middle Ages with sophisticated bodily images and metaphors that systematically blurred the often artificial distinctions between body and soul, body and world, body and image, body and text. Both earthbound and transcendental, always inseparable from the soul, the body and its parts provided an endless source for contemplating the divine and for practically uniting with it.

Sylvia Hout examines the role of the body as a factor in individual identity (gendered, human, beastly) in medieval French courtly romance, epic, and religious drama. All her writers agree in seeing the body as a kind of gloss on a morally constructed self —a corruptible body which is a mere manifestation of original sin. She shows how repeatedly in such texts the body and the social role are brought into accord, and how the truth of the body is finally revealed, thus confirming or negating the socially defined persona. Yet the constant possibility of metamorphosis, hybridity, or other forms of bodily instability in such tales hints that the body itself may sometimes be shaped by a self that is socially determined, but also reveals the coded inner conflicts of the self. In such cases, gender, class and species were written into the body rather than being produced by it.

The same publisher is now preparing another six-volume series entitled *Cultural History of Medicine*, with a second volume entitled «The Medieval Age» (800-1450). Both the editors and the contributors to that new volume will face a challenging task: to demarcate their enterprise (writing the cultural history of medicine) in relation to this volume, and to meet its high standards. ■

Joseph Ziegler  
University of Haifa