

The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture. Edited by Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. vi+327; 12 figs. ISBN (cloth): 9781442644700; ISBN (ebook): 9781442661394. \$70 (cloth or ebook).

AKBARI AND ROSS SITUATE their edited collection, *The Ends of the Body*, in relation to the study of “body history” that has generated such interest since the early 1990s. While other collections (which they survey carefully in the introduction) have produced body history in relation to feminist, queer, or psychoanalytical theories, Conklin and Ross propose that “Time and space are . . . intimately linked in medieval discourses of the body” (6). Evaluating the medieval body at its limit, its end, in relation to death and afterlife or in its role as symbol of the larger community allows for a complex rendition of body that does not reduce the body to its gender alone, or sexuality alone, or to a dichotomy of body/soul.

The first kind of end, the end of the individual, seems a natural extension of existing approaches to body history: a focus on the decay of the body at death, on skin and bones as the limit of the body, or on the transition of the body from death to afterlife, all follow logically on other well-known projects that integrate history of science to understand medieval conceptions of body or probe theological concerns about resurrection. The second kind of end, the end of the communal body, is a valuable and persuasive reframing of the field that unmasks the problematic of linking body history too closely with individual bodies. “In the discourse of body as community as understood in spatial terms, the ‘ends’ of the body demarcate the boundary line of the group, the line that divides those who are included from those who are excluded; yet in the discourse of the body as community understood in temporal terms, the ‘end’ of the body marks the moment of dissolution, when the spatial boundary ceases to be” (6). Addressing the time/space dimensions of bodies both individual and communal, the essays in this collection cover a wide range of cultures and eras, seeking out aspects of body in texts and in communities that might otherwise not be rendered in relation to the body.

The essays in Part 1, “Foundations,” consider bodies or bodily representations as “the cornerstones upon which communities are built” (13). In “Books, Bodies, and Bones: Hilduin of St-Denis and the Relics of St Dionysius,” Anna Taylor explores the interplay between relics and texts in the miracles that occurred in the ninth-century French abbey of St. Denis when the king donated the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (conflated with the Denis to

whom the abbey was dedicated). Her essay outlines how manuscripts could take on the embodiment of relics and, inversely, how relics could be read like texts. In “Death is Not the End,” Christine Kralik revisits the imagery of the “three living and the three dead” moral story illustrated in the Berlin Hours of Mary of Burgundy, arguing that the portrayal of one of the three living with the features of the queen was not meant to commemorate her death, but rather to serve the living Mary as a *memento mori* in which she was inscribed into the morality tale. Amy Appleford’s contribution, “The Good Death of Richard Whittington: Corpse and Corporation,” traces the extension of “the body’s reach in time and space through ‘perpetual bequests’” (86). Her fascinating study of a set of ordinances translated into the vernacular reveals a medieval “experiment in urban lay spirituality” (101) by the executors of his estate, who established an almshouse in Whittington’s name by leveraging public understanding of his “good death” and presumption of what his legacy would entail.

Part 2, “Bodily Rhetoric,” depicts the body as a “vehicle of meaning” (14) through its physiological detail or through its role in performance. Sylvia Parsons, in “An Epic Incarnation of Salvation: The Function of the Body in the *Eupolemius*,” uses the topic of body (animal similes, bodily satire, death) to reveal how the hybrid Latin text *Eupolemius*, an epic recounting of biblical history, performs hybridity intentionally to evoke discomfort and a sense of incompleteness. Sarah Sheehan’s “Losing Face: Heroic Discourse and Inscription in Flesh in *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*” analyzes the continuing equation of disfigurement with dishonor in Irish sagas, cogently arguing that, in warrior cultures that are constituted around honor and shame, honor is fundamentally embodied. One of the editors, Ross, in “The Dazzling Sword of Language: Masculinity and Persuasion in Classical and Medieval Rhetoric,” explores the ascription of “martial masculinity” (152) as an appropriate metaphor for the processes of language or rhetoric. The art of persuasion is figured from the late classical period to the late Middle Ages as a warrior art, aligned with aggression, turmoil, and death. The violence inherent in rhetoric thus genders language masculine.

Part 3, “Performing the Body,” maps how individual bodies are “the medium through which the social body is maintained” (15). Danielle Westerhof’s “Amputating the Traitor: Healing the Social Body in Public Executions for Treason in Late Medieval England” discusses how traitors in England were figured both as the prime symbol of the corruption of society as a whole and as the element that must be cut off, amputated, in order to heal the communal body. Catherine Rider’s “‘A Defect of the Mind or Body’: Impotence and Sexuality in Medieval Theology and Canon Law” broaches the topic of impotence as a

critical yet neglected part of the study of medieval sexuality. By considering Augustine's influence on Gratian's canon law, and how both were received in scholastic theology, she notes the radical change between Augustine's assumption that sexual desire is not rationally controlled and later authors' assumptions that bodies under control and in good health can always engage in intercourse. Linda Jones's essay, "Bodily Performance and Body Talk in Medieval Islamic Preaching," is the one essay of the collection that goes beyond both Christianity and central Europe/England. Examining sermons and tractates preached or circulated in the Maghreb and Iberia, Jones suggests that monism, body-soul unity, was commonly accepted in medieval Islamic thought. She highlights the critical role of the body as the locus of both sincerity and hypocrisy, as actions toward others and in prayer not only prove piety more effectively than statements of belief, but also mold the performers into that which their bodies enact.

Finally, Part 4, "Material Body," considers the physiological details of bodies and how they undergird societal constructions. Elma Brenner, in "The Leprous Body in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Rouen: Perceptions and Responses," opposes the common assumption that lepers were universally despised in medieval society, bringing to light not only that lepers were numbered among the religious as a category of person God had chosen to undergo great suffering and therefore great reward, but also that this designation was only available to certain classes and social backgrounds. Wendy Matlock's "The Feminine Flesh in the *Disputacione betwix the Body and Wormes*" explores medieval English debate poems that depart from the common structure of the body and soul in argument, choosing two particular poems that star female figures and thereby complicate the association of femininity with carnality. Most interesting is her analysis of a poem in which the body disputes with worms rather than the soul, thereby associating both genders with the body. The collection closes with the other editor, Akbari, and her "Death as Metamorphosis in the Devotional and Political Allegory of Christine de Pizan" in which she argues that the mutability of body means that any use of the body as a symbol for community also brings with it the discomfort that community too might be mutable. She proves her point through considering Christine de Pizan's designation of *vertu* as functioning like a humoral fluid coursing through the body politic writ large or the king in particular.

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