

Katharine Park. *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection.* New York: Zone Books, 2006. Pp. 419; ill.
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Secrets of Women is the kind of book most readers will wish they had written. Fascinating in both subject and approach, it provides insight into the increasing interest in women's bodies and their function at the conclusion of the Middle Ages. The rise of this attention to women's sexuality and generation, called "women's secrets," is simultaneous with the rise of dissection of corpses. Katharine Park traces these two parallel developments, examining cases of women who were posthumously dissected to reveal their secrets. These cases show a range of interests, as well as inherent ideas about female identity, that governed late-medieval and early modern thinking. Looking at an abbess, a lactating virgin, wives, mothers, and a criminal, Park uncovers a taxonomy that pairs the functions of women's bodies with the social roles that derive from them.

Dissection, it appears in Park's analysis, was much more common in the period than one might believe given the religious prohibitions against the violation of the body—particularly the female body. Thus, she demonstrates, the female body played a greater role in the development of anatomical understanding than was previously understood, particularly in Italy. However, the hands-on science did not necessarily produce what contemporary readers would call scientific results, as the imagined woman often dictated what was found within her body. For instance, holy women's corpses often revealed sacred relics, while the bodies of wives and mothers offered more factual information about the reproductive process. The opening of bodies that Park discusses is most interesting in and of itself, but it is her incisive connection of medieval imagined bodies to these real bodies that is the highlight of this very compelling work.

Park's introduction offers a history of dissection from approximately 1300 to the mid-sixteenth century. Beginning as a series of practices which had little to do with advancing scientific knowledge for its own sake, dissection became an increasingly academic process designed to answer urgent questions about anatomy and how it worked. The publication of anatomical texts increased the practice, and Park includes salient illustrations from these texts to show how women were envisioned in the 1494 *Fasiculo de medicina*, in Leonardo da Vinci's drawings, and in Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), considered to be the first full analysis of the human body. This uncovering of the "secrets of women" as part of the development of scientific anatomy was double-edged; on the one hand, Park notes, it implies women's access to and

hoarding of knowledge about sexuality and reproduction which was hidden from men; however, the discovery of the reproductive organs and their function also provided information essential to women's health and survival. Since childbirth was a primary killer of women, the information revealed through dissection had the potential to alleviate some of the dangers women faced. Although the male body remained the generic body, women's reproductive systems were finally understood as themselves, rather than the inside-out male organs they had been thought to be. As a result, women's interior bodies became a symbol of the potential of dissection to demonstrate truths that had previously been hidden, placing women at the center of the success of the practice.

The chapters that follow the introduction each examine a particular case of the opening of a different woman's body. Examining where, why, and by whom her body was dissected, Park is able to interrogate the social, religious, and intellectual practices that inform each example. "Holy Anatomies" considers the 1308 dissection of Abbess Chiara of Montefalco, who was embalmed by the sisters of her order to preserve her holy body, a process which included the evisceration of the corpse and the saving of her heart in a separate place. When it was cut open as part of the continued exploration of the body, the heart contained the image of the crucified Christ and other passion symbols. The heart then became an efficacious relic, performing miracles. As an example of a holy evisceration, Chiara shows an internal body that figures her external self; a holy woman with a holy interior.

The atypical nature of these holy anatomies is contrasted in the second chapter, "Secrets of Women," which examines the idea that women's bodies were the repositories of secrets both dangerous and salubrious; these secrets had the potential to disrupt "natural" orders and hierarchies while providing access to useful medical knowledge. Chapter three, "The Mother's Part," examines Fiametta Admimari's, a Florentine noblewoman, dissection in 1477 and how it both heightened and debunked myths about the mother's role in reproduction, birth, and the constitution of the children she produced. The repeated examinations of the corpse of Elena Duglioli, a mystic from Bologna, who died in 1520, is the concern of chapter four, "The Evidence of the Senses." Because her visions so often related to her body, the dissections were used to interrogate them, as the medical profession became increasingly involved in investigating the truth of female mystics' experience. This chapter also considers the rise of anatomical manuals and their representations of the female body and how those demonstrate knowledge about and attitudes towards their subjects. Finally, chapter 5, "The Empire of Anatomy," considers the body of an unnamed

criminal woman, probably executed in 1542, who appears on the title page of Andreas Vesalius's anatomical treatise. This illustration's foregrounding of the female figure, Park asserts, forces the rethinking of the cultural meanings of dissection as an icon of science. Following the five chapters are detailed notes and an extensive bibliography that shows the depth and range of Park's research underlying her cogent and intriguing analysis.

Clearly *Secrets of Women* offers a vital contribution to the history of anatomy, for which it has been recognized by the 2009 William Welch Medal given by the American Association for the History of Medicine and the 2007 Margaret W. Rossiter Prize given by the History of Science Society. However, its contributions to medieval and feminist studies are equally significant, offering important ways to understand the female body and men's attempt to understand it from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. By showing the movement from the body as imagined object to the body as real entity and the ways the latter affected continuing fantasies about the female form, Park adds the scientific to other vital approaches to comprehending the medieval and early modern world of women. In doing so, she breaks down a persistent myth—of a fixed division between medieval and early modern science—which is currently being dismantled in other disciplines as well. By showing resistance to dissection in the Middle Ages to be primarily a myth and showing that the history of this dissection takes place in many more arenas than the academic, she demonstrates how gender was able to shape knowledge. Dissection, in Park's understanding, is "one of the many tools used by men and women to make sense of their experiences and to advance their interests in the world" (38), and *Secrets of Women* therefore becomes one of the many tools medievalist and feminist scholars have in their arsenal to construct more fully the operations of the past.

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