

CHAPTER FIVE

The Empire of Anatomy

Almost nothing is known about the woman whose corpse is the focus of my last chapter, although she is more familiar by far to historians of medicine than any of the women I have thus far discussed. Her name, occupation, and family status are a mystery, as is the date of her death in the northern Italian city of Padua, most likely occurring in the winter of 1541–1542. Her fame rests on the verbal and visual descriptions of her corpse in *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, published in 1543 by Andreas Vesalius of Brussels, then an ambitious young professor of anatomy at the local university.¹ She was the subject of two of the four illustrations of women's bodies in the *Fabrica* (figures 5.1 and 5.2) and the basis for the cadaver depicted on its title page. This image reveals an idealized and fictionalized version of a dissection scene presided over by Vesalius (standing just to the left of the dissecting table), who is lecturing to a large and highly engaged audience (figure 5.3). The woodcut has been interpreted by generations of historians as an icon of the reformed anatomy of the sixteenth century, which elevated the truths of the body as revealed by human dissection over textual descriptions.² Like Jacopo Berengario of Carpi, whose *Commentaries on the Anatomy of Mondino* of 1521 was an important model, Vesalius recruited local artists for his ambitious



Figure 5.1. Dissected body of a woman showing the position of the uterus (L) and bladder (T).
 Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica* (Basel: Joannes Oporinus, 1543), bk. 5, figure 24.



Figure 5.3. Vesalius dissecting the body of a female criminal. Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, title page.

project, in this case from the workshop of Titian in nearby Venice. Although their identities cannot be definitively confirmed — they very likely included Domenico Campagnola and a Fleming, Jan van Calcar — it is nonetheless clear that the *Fabrica* was the product of an intimate collaboration between the anatomist and various artists, both draftsmen and woodblock cutters, and that Vesalius was involved at every stage in the preparation of the woodcuts for which the book is famous.³

Vesalius recounted everything we know about this woman at the end of his chapter on the uterus, in Book 5, where he addressed the location of the spermatic vessels, which Berengario had vehemently discussed in his own treatise.⁴ According to Vesalius, the woman had been condemned to death for an unspecified crime and had attempted unsuccessfully to stave off execution by claiming to be pregnant. However, “when interrogated by midwives under orders from the podestà — they asserted that she was not pregnant — she was never willing to indicate how long she had gone without menstruating, however diligently we tried to ascertain this.”⁵ Vesalius’ dissection of her uterus confirmed the accuracy of the midwives’ judgment. The only additional details available regarding her come from the caption to figure 5.2, which describes her as “a woman of very tall stature who had often given birth,” and from revisions to the second edition of the *Fabrica*, published twelve years later, that refer to her as “a woman of rare size and of middle age.”⁶

Any narrative of the events leading up to this woman’s anatomy is therefore conjectural. She was probably not a native of Padua or its environs, for the university statutes that governed the practice of public dissection exempted any criminal who was born in Paduan territory or was a Venetian citizen. (Padua had come under Venetian control in the early fifteenth century.) Restrictions of this sort, common throughout northern Italy, were

intended to protect respectable local families from the horror and shame involved in the public display of the naked and mutilated corpse of a kinsperson or neighbor.⁷ Vesalius' silence about the woman's origins suggests that she came from an inconsequential social background, as does the fact that she was hanged, a penalty applied only exceptionally to those of patrician birth. She had most likely been convicted of murder — along with robbery, the most common capital crime in the Venetian territories — although this too is by no means certain.⁸ Once condemned, she would most probably have been hanged at the Camposanto, Padua's principal execution grounds, outside the Porta San Giovanni, in the city's western wall.

Assuming she was treated like other criminals, she would have been attended the evening before her death by two members of the confraternity of San Giovanni Evangelista della Morte, a company of pious laypeople whose special task was to assist criminals on the brink of execution.⁹ Their mission was to prepare her physically and spiritually for this ordeal and eventually to bury her corpse.¹⁰ The confraternity statutes required two brothers to feed her — dissection of an executed man's stomach, they noted, had revealed that the "great agony" preceding this kind of death speeded up digestion — and to provide for her confession.¹¹ More than anything else, however, the two brothers aimed, like members of other such confraternities throughout northern and central Italy, to reconcile her to her punishment, so that she not only accepted but welcomed it as a manifestation of divine justice. To this end, they encouraged her to identify with Jesus and the Christian martyrs, who went willingly to their deaths. In this woman's case, because she was to be hanged, they would have asked her to meditate specifically on her similitude to the crucified Christ, "who hung on the wood of the cross."¹² (Those who were about to be decapitated were reminded of Saint Paul; those who were

about to be quartered, of Saint Hippolytus.) If she accepted her death with true contrition, they would assure her that “God would remit all [her] penance, so that [she] could go straight to heaven,” rather than expiating her sins in purgatory or hell, and “everyone would have compassion for [her].”¹³

The next day, all the brothers would have put on their habits (white capes marked with a black cross) and accompanied her in the extended public procession that delivered her to the Camposanto. After she had died, they would have removed her body from the gallows and, under normal circumstances, they would have buried her in the cemetery there.¹⁴ In this case, however, because she was to be anatomized publicly, her corpse would have been consigned to representatives of the university and carried back inside the city, to a temporary wooden theater constructed for the occasion, perhaps in a local church, courtyard, or classroom. After the anatomy was completed, they would have gathered up the various pieces of her body for burial in a Christian grave.¹⁵ This last act of piety lay at the heart of their mission; before the foundation of confraternities of this sort, beginning in the fourteenth century, the bodies of criminals would have been left to rot in the fields outside the city, as the ultimate symbol of their exclusion from the Christian community.

The woman on the title page of the *Fabrica*, in other words, was among those scholars usually identify as the subjects of human dissection in late medieval and early modern Europe: executed criminals. From the early days of human dissection as a pedagogical practice in the years around 1300, anatomies performed in medical faculties and (somewhat later) in colleges of physicians or surgeons had been largely confined to this group, first by custom and subsequently by decree.¹⁶ In Padua, for example, the statutes of the faculty of arts and medicine that governed Vesalius’ teaching prescribed an annual public anatomy of “the cadaver of some

criminal provided by the judges after execution, that is to say, of one man and one woman or at least one of [the two] each year.”¹⁷ Relying on provisions of this sort, historians of anatomy and the body have made much of the intimate connection between the practice of human dissection and the criminal justice system, either to underscore the supposedly polluting or “taboo” nature of dissection, which pressed anatomists to distance themselves from the abject provenance of their corpses by the use of elaborate visual and verbal strategies, or to show the implication of medical learning and authority in the punitive apparatus of state power.¹⁸ There is indeed ample evidence that medical scholars relied on princes and judges not only for anatomical material but also for subjects of occasional toxicological experiments;¹⁹ nevertheless, historians have significantly overstated the degree to which the criminal justice system was implicated in anatomical study and vice versa. They have asserted that dissection was considered an integral part of the criminal’s punishment, despite the almost complete absence of contemporary testimony to this effect, and inflated the relative importance of ceremonial public dissections by downplaying the more intimate anatomies of private and hospital patients — not to mention animals — that lay at the heart of late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century anatomical teaching and research.²⁰ The latter rarely involved the corpses of condemned criminals precisely because these were so difficult to obtain, given both the infrequency of executions of foreign criminals and the difficulty of coordinating them with the academic schedule. (For obvious reasons, dissections were generally conducted during the cold season, in January or February.)²¹ The reliance on private individuals was even greater in the case of female cadavers, since women were rarely convicted of capital crimes, a subject of perennial comment and complaint by medical faculties.²² Thus, of the various female bodies Berengario referred to in his *Commentaries*, only two

belonged to executed criminals; most of the others came from his own practice.

Vesalius was an exception to this rule, however; compared to previous anatomical writers, he seems to have been unusually dependent for material on judges and other secular authorities. Not only was the scope of his research project unprecedented, but he also lacked private patients, as a result of both his youth — he was only twenty-six when he began preparing the *Fabrica* — and his single-minded focus on anatomical teaching and research. (When Berengario published his *Commentaries*, in contrast, he had been working as a surgeon for over forty years.) Nonetheless, despite Vesalius' relatively heavy reliance on the corpses of executed criminals, there is no convincing evidence that he (or any other fifteenth- or sixteenth-century anatomist, for that matter) attempted to obscure their provenance in order to distance himself from their abject origin. On the contrary: the text of the *Fabrica*, like that of Berengario's *Commentaries*, is matter-of-fact about which bodies came from the gallows and which did not. In fact, Vesalius (unlike Berengario) seems to have gone out of his way to underscore the distasteful and occasionally illicit origins of his cadavers, recounting gory details with gleeful satisfaction, as in the cases of the skeleton he stole piecemeal from the gibbet outside Louvain, the “still-beating heart” he extracted from the corpse of a man who had just been quartered, and the body of a woman procured at the initiative of some of his students. These students

pulled from her tomb the attractive whore of a monk at the church of St. Anthony here, who had died suddenly, as if from suffocation of the uterus or some other fulminating illness. They brought her in for public dissection, having removed all the skin from her body with amazing industry, so that she would not be recognized by the monk,

who with her relatives was complaining to the Podestà that the corpse had been stolen from the tomb.²³

A number of the smaller images in the *Fabrica* are similarly explicit. The woodcut initial *I* (figure 5.4) shows a nighttime scene in which playful putti, presumably representing Vesalius' students, pull what appears to be a female corpse from its tomb — an apparent reference to the story of the monk's mistress. In the initial *L* (figure 5.5), two putti let down a corpse from a gallows, watched over by a priest and a person wearing the robe and hood of a confraternity for the comfort of condemned criminals; the initial *N* depicts a putto receiving the head of a decapitated criminal.²⁴ And of course Vesalius' innovative choice to focus his title-page woodcut on the corpse of a female criminal, surrounded by a large and rowdy male crowd and positioned for maximum sexual effect, also underscores the potentially transgressive elements in anatomical dissection.

Vesalius was by no means the first to exploit the obvious sexual element in the anatomy of the genitals for the entertainment of his students. This practice was probably as old as anatomy itself. Certainly there are references to it as long ago as the early fourteenth century, when the person who recorded Mondino's lectures on the generation of the fetus (probably a student) included a coarse remark in Italian about sex between women at the point where Mondino noted that women could experience pleasure and emit seed in the absence of a male orgasm.²⁵ In 1540, Matteo Corti, a professor of medicine at the University of Bologna, earned the disapproval of one of the German students who attended his lectures on anatomy (performed with Vesalius' assistance) when he joked repeatedly about the impotence of old men, the naturalness of the search for sexual pleasure, and the familiarity of students with illnesses of the penis. "Here all the



Figure 5.4. Graverobbing scene. Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, p. 55.



Figure 5.5. Removing a body from the gallows for dissection. Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, p. 168.

Italians laughed, including Corti,” the German noted tartly, remarking elsewhere that sex was licit only in the context of a legitimate marriage.²⁶ This brand of humor also appeared in images of dissection; the late fifteenth-century manuscript painting reproduced in figure 3.2 shows a learned physician (on the right) holding up a cadaver’s penis while the man next to him comments on its size. In this sense, Vesalius’ emphasis on the physical and moral violence involved in anatomical study is a fairly sedate version of what Michael Sappol has called the “homosocial meaning of anatomical mayhem” — the creation of a sense of mastery and camaraderie through rough, often sexualized behavior around corpses.²⁷ Where Vesalius differed from his predecessors was in placing this element front and center on the title page and incorporating it into his published Latin text, rather than restricting it to oral comments in the classroom.

In general, Vesalius emphasized the transgressive aspects of anatomy to support his extraordinary commitment to discovering truths regarding the human frame. His gratuitous stress on the repugnant, sometimes shocking features of his work allowed him to demonstrate his personal dedication to his subject and to claim special epistemological authority gained from immersing himself in the dirty stuff of nature, body, and soul.²⁸ Unlike more squeamish teachers of anatomy, who contented themselves with manipulating books and words rather than dead bodies, he wrested knowledge from matter itself. Further, since he was not particularly active in private practice and not anatomizing his own patients, he had no particular reason to dwell on their sensibilities and those of their families.

Vesalius’ lack of experience as a medical practitioner and his unusually heavy reliance on the corpses of executed criminals shaped his work in important ways. In particular, it limited his knowledge of women’s bodies, so that his account of the female

genitals in the first edition of the *Fabrica* is vague, brief, and inaccurate, and does not begin to compare with Berengario's in richness and detail. Like Berengario and Gabriele Zerbi, Vesalius contemptuously rejected the vulgar account of the uterus as having seven cells and accepted Galen's contention in *On the Use of Parts*, which had finally been published in 1528, that women's genitals were internalized and inverted versions of men's — an idea illustrated to surprising effect in figure 5.2.²⁹ Like Berengario and virtually every other learned medical writer of his day, he accepted the obvious corollary, agreeing with Galen (against Aristotle) that women, like men, produced seed, albeit of a scarcer, colder, and wetter sort.³⁰ Beyond these commonplaces, however, he had relatively little useful to say about the female genitals. By his own admission, he had never dissected a menstruating woman, so he could not determine which vessels carried menstrual blood to the genitals and whether these entered the uterus, the vagina, or both, a topic on which Berengario had held forth at length and illustrated in figure 4.1.³¹ Vesalius also had no experience with pregnant women, since criminals known to be pregnant were almost always allowed to give birth before execution — hence the (unsuccessful) claim of the woman who was the model for the title page³² — and unlike Berengario, he did not appear to have purchased miscarried fetuses from midwives, perhaps because his limited medical practice permitted few contacts with this group. Thus he noted that his treatment of the coverings of the human fetus would be based on the writings of others:

Although I have learned certain things based on the dissection of fetuses and pregnant uteruses and have conducted several demonstrations at the university, I have used only animals, nor have I [studied these organs] with the necessary care, for to this point I have been able to obtain very few women for dissection.³³

As a result, Vesalius was constrained to substitute a description of canine anatomy, characterized by an annular placenta, which the accompanying illustration attached, incongruously, to a human fetus.³⁴

Vesalius rectified many of these problems in the second edition of the *Fabrica* (1555), dramatically expanding and revising the relevant chapters on the basis of his later experience. (He had left his academic post even before the first edition was published, for a position as court physician to the Holy Roman emperor Charles V, to whom he had dedicated the *Fabrica*; this provided considerably more opportunities to inspect the bodies of private patients and to conduct additional anatomies.)³⁵ Nonetheless, as far as the first edition is concerned, his account of the female organs of generation, in the estimation of his great biographer and admirer Charles D. O'Malley, was the weakest section of the book.³⁶

Why then, given Vesalius' own awareness of the inadequacy of his discussion of the uterus — and given that virtually all previous depictions of dissection scenes in books of anatomy and medicine, like that in the *Fasiculo de medicina* (figure 2.5), had shown male cadavers³⁷ — did he choose to spotlight precisely that topic by placing it at the title page's center? One obvious answer lies in the imagined appeal of this image to a male audience; Vesalius aimed to increase his reputation (not to mention recoup his large investment in artists' fees), and he would certainly have expected this dramatic and novel image to help sell his book. Scholars have identified other important messages communicated by the woman's body. The obvious counterpoint between the skeleton behind the dissecting table and the opened uterus reinforces the function of the image as a *memento mori*, according to the Latin motto "When we are born we die; our end is but the pendant of our beginning."³⁸ The choice of cadaver also illustrated one of the *Fabrica*'s principal themes, the superiority of Vesalius' account to

Galen's, based on his own access to human cadavers, whereas (he alleged) Galen had to make do with animals.³⁹ Despite his inexperience with female bodies, Vesalius had dissected enough women to be able to make this point confidently. In his chapter on the (nonpregnant) uterus, he contemptuously rejected Galen's description of its supposed horns, noting that "Galen never inspected the uterus of a woman, unless it was in a dream, but only those of cows, goats, and sheep."⁴⁰ Finally, Vesalius certainly intended the scene to refer to the long tradition of using female genitals to symbolize the most recondite aspects of human anatomy and physiology and those least accessible to male readers and writers.

In addition to these general associations, however, Vesalius had more specific models in mind, which become clearer when his title page is compared with other iconographic traditions. The first of these, which focuses on the story of Saint Anthony and the miser's heart, foregrounds not the cadaver's sex but her status as criminal and sinner. The second illustrates the popular version of Roman imperial history that I described in Chapter Three, which began with the extraction of Julius Caesar from his dead mother and ended with Nero's inspection of Agrippina's womb. Placing the title page in the context of these stories, I will argue that the sex of Vesalius' cadaver is central to the author's presentation of himself as the founder of a reformed anatomy and that the image reflects an emergent idea of experience, which revised earlier notions of the relationship between viewer and corpse; this emphasized the distance between the (male) anatomist and his (female) object, using gender difference to loosen the bonds of reciprocity and identification that had informed medieval models of vision.

Saints and Sinners

One index of the new cultural visibility of anatomy in Italian cities was its appearance in devotional images. These included, for

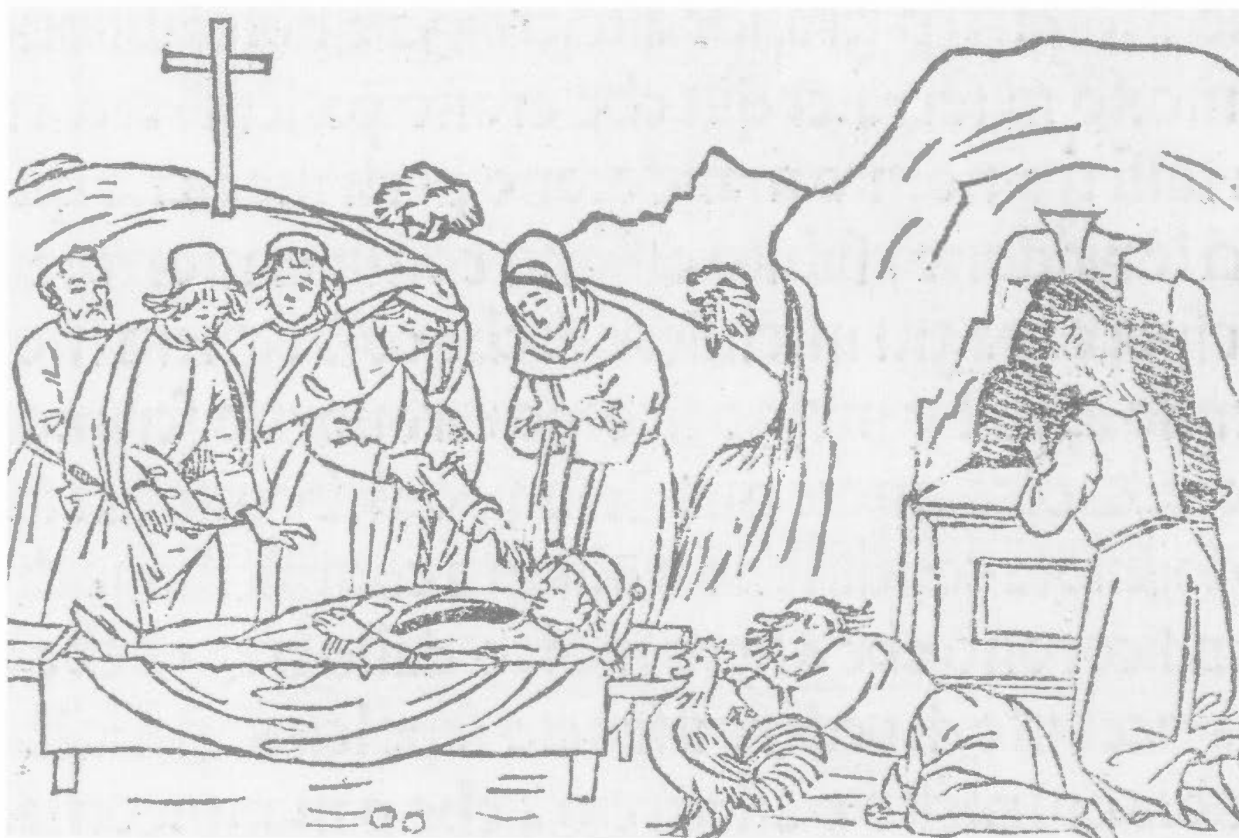


Figure 5.6. Death of the pilgrim Larghato. *Fior di virtù historiale* (Florence: Jacopo di Carlo?, 1491).

example, Sandro Botticelli's painting of the opening of Saint Ignatius of Antioch on the predella of the altarpiece he painted for the church of San Barnaba in Florence (ca. 1489) and the woodcut illustration in the didactic volume the *Flower of Virtue through Stories* (1491), which showed the anatomy of the pilgrim Larghato, who had died of joy on visiting Jerusalem (figure 5.6). Although the story of Saint Ignatius lacked a medical referent—he was tortured and executed by order of Emperor Trajan, after which he was found to have the name of Jesus on his heart in golden letters⁴¹—the fifteenth-century *Flower of Virtue* describes a private anatomy to determine the cause of death, similar to those discussed in Chapter Three:

Those present, believing [Larghato] was dead, sent for the doctors, and when the doctors saw him, they immediately said that he was dead. And having the body opened up the middle, they found written on his heart, “My sweet love Jesus Christ.” In this way the doctors, understanding his devout condition and happy complexion, judged that he had died of the joy he had received from seeing the Holy Sepulcher, since people die more quickly from joy than melancholy.⁴²

The best-known story to use dissection in the service of piety, however, concerned the miracle of the miser's heart and Saint Anthony of Padua.⁴³ The most famous depiction of this scene is the great bronze relief created in 1447 by the Florentine sculptor Donatello for the front of the high altar of Saint Anthony's basilica, only a few blocks from the university where Vesalius performed his anatomies almost a century later (figures 5.7–5.9).⁴⁴ Saint Anthony was a renowned miracle worker and the focus of enormous popular devotion in Padua.⁴⁵ The version of the story illustrated by Donatello appears in the *vita* written by Sicco Ricci Polentone around 1435. According to Polentone,



Figure 5.7. Donatello, *Miracle of Saint Anthony and the Miser's Heart*, bronze relief from the high altar of the Chiesa del Santo, Padua, 1447.

In Tuscany, which is a large province in Italy, Saint Anthony (as was customary) happened to attend the funeral of a rich and wealthy man. Suddenly, moved by the fervor of the spirit, he exclaimed, "The dead man should not be buried in a holy place, but outside the city walls, like a dog, since his soul is damned to hell and he does not have a heart in his body, for in the words attributed to the Lord by the holy evangelist Luke, 'Where his treasure is, there also is his heart.'" On hearing this, as is easy to believe, everyone became very excited, and various opinions were voiced. Finally, those who had been ordered to inspect the body opened up his chest. They did not find the heart inside it, but rather, as the saint had predicted, in the place where his money was. For this reason, the city praised both God and the saint, and the dead man was not buried in the tomb that had been prepared for him, but dragged to the countryside and buried like an ass.⁴⁶

Donatello's relief captures the horror of Saint Anthony's revelation, as described by Polentone, and the public consternation

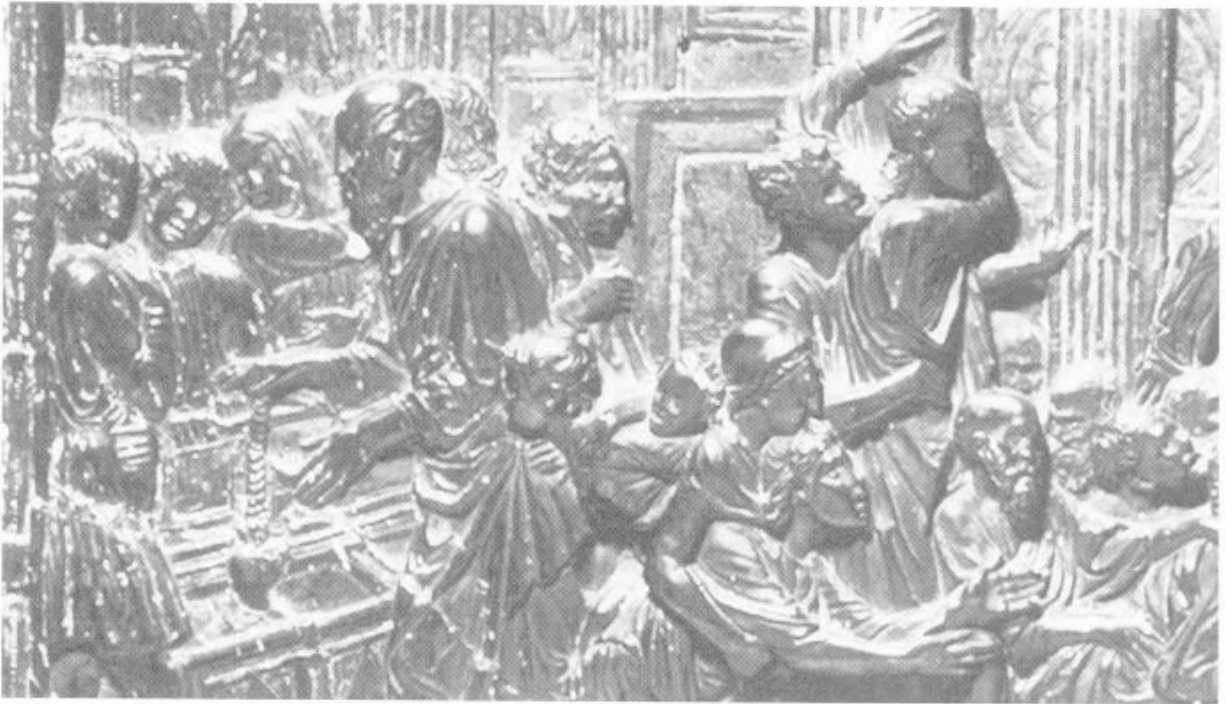


Figure 5.8. Detail of figure 5.7 showing the miser's heart being pulled from his moneybox.



Figure 5.9. Detail of figure 5.7 showing the opening of the miser's body after the revelation by Saint Anthony (far right).

provoked by the discovery of the missing heart. The funeral procession is drawn up in the background, complete with the banner of the confraternity to which the miser hypocritically belonged, in front of the church whose doors are now eternally shut to him. The crowd in the foreground is racked by intense and varied emotions; some bystanders recoil in fear, some adore the saint (who stands to the right of the corpse), and others strain to see inside the dead man's open body, which lies on his bier in the street. The disposition of the central figures — the corpse on its platform being opened by one man while another underscores the lesson with a pointed finger (figure 5.9) — echoes contemporary anatomical practice; a surgeon prepares to open the corpse, while a demonstrator stands by to point out the relevant structures, as in the woodcut of the *Fasciculo de medicina* of 1494 (figure 2.5).⁴⁷ The parallels are so striking that it is hard to believe that Donatello had not himself witnessed a dissection at the university during his sojourn in Padua, particularly given the interest in anatomy among contemporary Florentine artists.⁴⁸ Not only is the arrangement of the figures suggestive, but the corpse is also shown almost naked, which is not true of previous depictions of the miracle (compare figure 5.10, Francesco Pesellino's version, which served as a model for both Botticelli and the designer of the *Flower of Virtue* woodcut), and the heart being extracted from the money-box at the far left of the relief has a certain amount of anatomical detail (figure 5.8).

Vesalius' title-page woodcut appears to refer to Donatello's relief.⁴⁹ The scene takes place outdoors — note the pebbles at the bottom of the image — against an imaginary, classicizing architectural background, rendered with self-conscious attention to perspective. The central figures are surrounded by a large crowd of people with individualized and highly expressive physiognomies, in a variety of attitudes; a few turn away, others are inattentive,

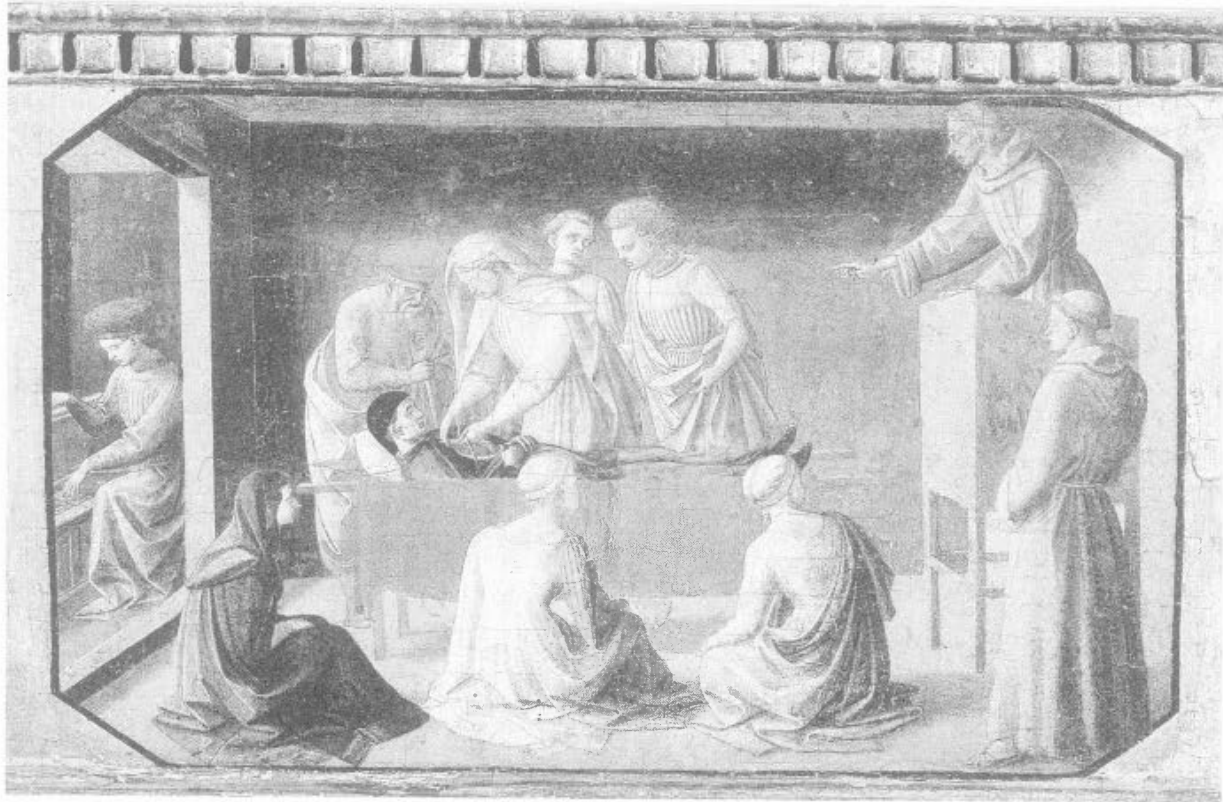


Figure 5.10. Francesco Pesellino, *Miracle of Saint Anthony and the Miser's Heart*, predella panel from Filippo Lippi's altarpiece for the Chapel of the Novitiate in the church of Santa Croce in Florence, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, ca. 1445.

but most display intense curiosity. While many stand, several are kneeling in the front. Even the puzzling naked figure clutching a column to the left of the title page has a (clothed) counterpart in the relief.⁵⁰ His hand outstretched, Vesalius stands beside the cadaver of the female criminal — like the miser, an abject sinner — as the saint stands next to the miser's corpse. The parallel between the images is broken, however, in the arrangement of the central figures. In the title page, the corpse has been turned with its feet to the reader, and two of Donatello's figures, the man opening the body and the pointing saint, have been subsumed into a single personage: the figure of the anatomist, Vesalius himself. In this way, the woodcut reinforces one of the *Fabrica*'s main contentions: that anatomy can progress as a discipline only if anatomists perform their own dissections, rather than leaving the work to others (as in figure 2.5). Because the Vesalian anatomist opens the cadaver in addition to demonstrating its structures, the surgeon (in front of the table) has been relegated to the ancillary role of sharpening the razors.⁵¹

One of the effects of Donatello's relief, juxtaposed with Vesalius' title page, is to call attention to the counterpoint between sin and sanctity in the rituals and ideologies relating to the execution of criminals in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy and to emphasize its relationship to anatomical dissection.⁵² Donatello's miser is a sinner consigned to eternal damnation, his corpse destined to be abandoned outside the city walls, as executed criminals were before the foundation of confraternities devoted to burying them in hallowed ground. His opened body assimilates him to the cadavers of criminals granted to medical faculties for dissection.⁵³ At the same time, however, there are intimations of sanctity in Donatello's portrayal of the scene. The miser's lolling head and dangling arm recalls images of the deposition of Christ from the cross, while his bier, set parallel to the church door,

recalls an altar. As in many other contemporary devotional images, most notably those of the Crucifixion, martyrdom and criminality are provocatively juxtaposed (for example, figure 5.11).⁵⁴ One of the aims of such portrayals was to elicit compassion in the viewer: the compassion (“co-suffering”) promised, perhaps disingenuously, to condemned criminals by the confraternity of San Giovanni Evangelista della Morte in Padua and modeled by Mary at the foot of the cross.⁵⁵ The viewer was expected to identify with the desperate state of the sinner, taking the martyr and the contrite criminal as models to be emulated, while the criminal who had not repented was to be pitied and abhorred.

The association between executed criminal and martyr — both subjected to spectacular suffering at the hands of secular authorities — is dramatized in several of the woodcuts in Berengario’s 1521 *Commentaries*. Two of these, which demonstrate the exterior muscles of the front and back of the body, are posed as *écorchés* against a rural background in the posture of saints holding the instruments of their martyrdom, the executioner’s rope and ax (figures 4.4 and 5.12). The most striking woodcut of all, however, was the one chosen by Berengario to illustrate the muscular anatomy of the arms: a flayed figure of the crucified Christ (figure 5.13).⁵⁶ Here the hanged criminal is identified with Jesus, as confraternities for the comfort of the condemned prescribed. This edgy image may have gone a bit too far for contemporary readers, for Berengario eliminated it from his *Short Introduction to Anatomy*, published the following year.

Given the associations between criminality, martyrdom, sanctity, and anatomy in contemporary artworks, as well as its relationship to Donatello’s relief, the title page of the *Fabrica* is striking for the degree to which it downplays the religious element. The dissecting table is turned perpendicular to the picture plane, which diminishes its resemblance to an altar; neither the skeleton nor the

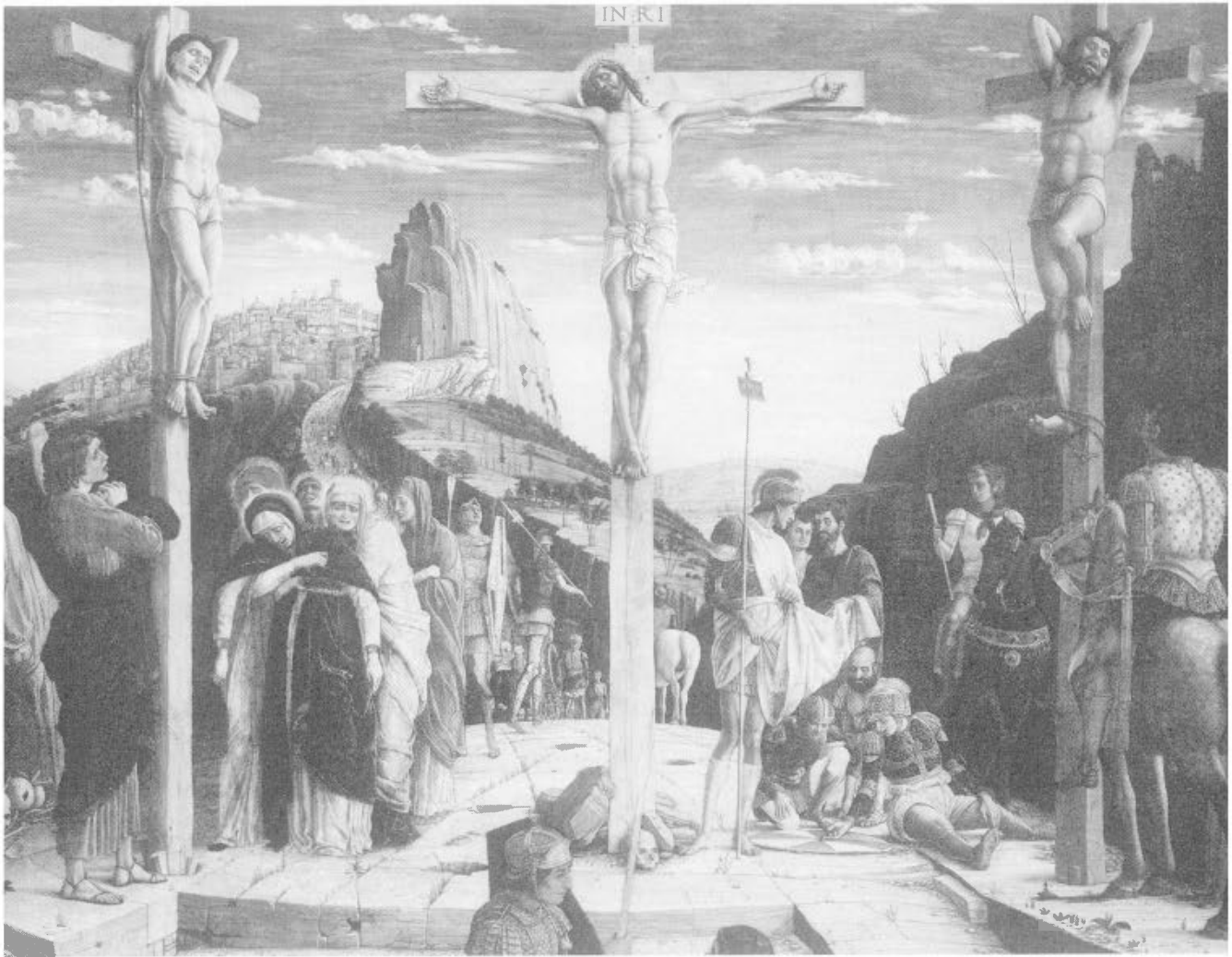


Figure 5.11. Andrea Mantegna, *Crucifixion*, predella panel from Mantegna's altarpiece for the church of San Zeno in Verona, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1457–1459.

architectural surroundings that replaced the church in the background of the relief has an obvious Christian referent. (The skeleton as a death symbol can be found in ancient Roman art.)⁵⁷ The same is true of the illustrations embedded in the text, with the exception of the author portrait, which I will discuss below, and the playful woodcut initials that show priests and confraternity members attending executions; the latter have none of the pathos that characterizes Berengario's illustrations of male cadavers and contemporary images of martyrdom. While the title page's foreshortened cadaver may appear to recall Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, that figure is draped from the waist down and its legs are not splayed, which softens the emphasis on the internal and external genitals that is such a striking feature of the image that opens the *Fabrica*.⁵⁸ Finally, Vesalius' cadaver is female, the only woman but one — at the back, between the second and third columns from the right — in a sea of male viewers. This, together with her undignified posture, discourages identification with her, let alone compassion, on the part of either the audience in the title page woodcut or the presumably male reader of the difficult Latin text.

The *Fabrica*'s title page thus marks a significant step in what Andrea Carlino has called the "desacralization" of the anatomical cadaver.⁵⁹ As Carlino points out, this process was gradual; Christian references continued to appear in some anatomical illustrations and depictions of dissections well after Vesalius.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the secular cast of the images in the *Fabrica* is striking; the Christian elements in the woodcuts of Berengario's *Commentaries* have been eliminated and the classical ones multiplied and emphasized, as in the famous series of musclemen of Book 2 or the trope of sculptural fragments that informs Book 5 (for example, figure 5.1). Insofar as Christian resonances persist, they are confined to the frontmatter: the author portrait and the title page, with its quotation of Donatello's relief. But even in the latter, the *Fabrica*



Figure 5.12. Exterior muscles of the back of the body. Jacopo Berengario of Carpi, *Commentaria*, fol. 520v.

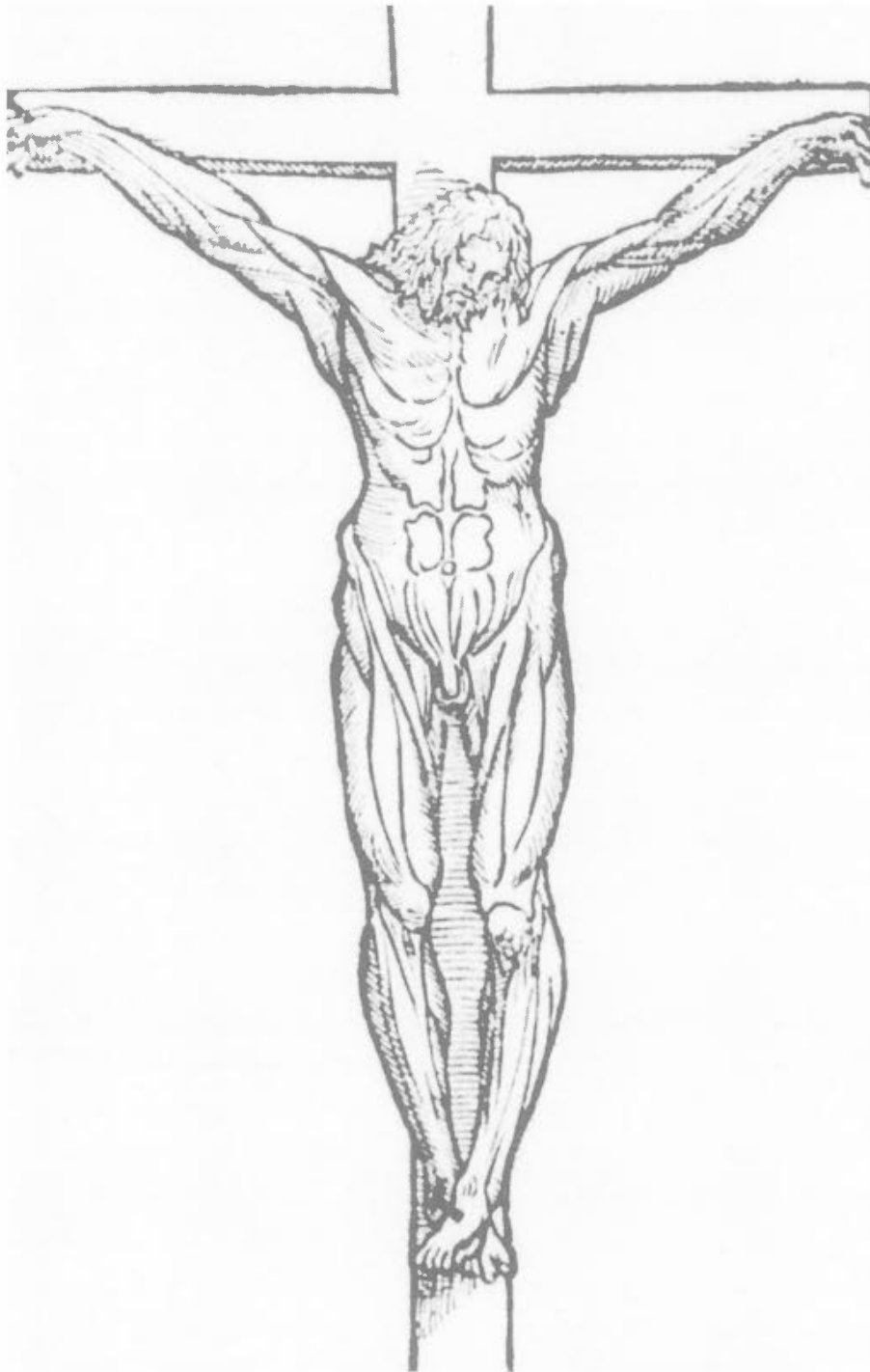


Figure 5.13. The muscles of the arms. Jacopo Berengario of Carpi, *Commentaria*, fol. 19v.

has dramatically shifted the frame of reference: whereas contemporary ideology identified the saint with the cadaver (through the identification of both with the executed criminal), the title page identified the saint with the dissector: Vesalius' position and gesture echo the attitude of Saint Anthony in the relief; each man interprets the corpse for the instruction of his listeners. This daring move is part of Vesalius' transformation of the anatomist from a sober lecturer in an academic gown, a stock figure on many sixteenth-century anatomical title pages, into a heroic, even transgressive, figure as part of his campaign to attract the patronage of the Holy Roman emperor Charles V.

Translations of Empire

Vesalius dedicated the *Fabrica* to the emperor in hopes (soon realized) of obtaining a post as imperial physician. Like the dedicatory preface, the title-page woodcut reflects key themes in Hapsburg imperial ideology, which identified the Hapsburg empire as the successor to the ancient Roman Empire and the Hapsburg dynasty as the heirs of the Julio-Claudian line.⁶¹ In particular, it evokes two episodes in Roman imperial mythography, the birth of Caesar and Nero's anatomy of Agrippina, which I analyzed in Chapter Three as ways of thinking about genealogy, paternity, and the relative importance of paternal and maternal contributions to the child. As I related there, the version of Roman history that circulated widely in vernacular writings began and ended with a woman's open womb; Caesar, the first emperor, was cut from the uterus of his dead mother, while Nero, the last in Caesar's lineage, killed his own mother, Agrippina, to see the place where he was conceived. Both stories constitute in different ways — Caesar in a heroic mode and Nero as a cautionary example — fantasies of masculine self-birth and a pure male lineage uncontaminated by the female principle.

These two stories had lost none of their appeal in intervening years, especially in the Low Countries and France, where Vesalius was born and educated. There they circulated in a variety of medieval texts: the *Deeds of the Romans* and other vernacular retellings of Roman imperial history (on the birth of Caesar); and Jacobus de Voragine's mid-thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*, Jean de Meun's section of the *Romance of the Rose*, and Laurent de Premierfait's French version of Giovanni Boccaccio's *On the Downfalls of Famous Men* (on the opening of Agrippina). Woodcuts of the two scenes replaced the painted images that decorated many earlier manuscripts of these medieval works (figures 1.9, 3.8, 5.14, and 5.15) and were inserted into new editions of ancient sources; an early sixteenth-century Venetian edition of Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* includes a striking illustration of Julius Caesar's birth (figure 3.7).⁶² Learned writers recognized that the story of Nero's anatomy of Agrippina was a medieval interpolation, but it lost little of its force in the popular imagination. Among other things, it was staged in a French play, *The Vengeance of Our Lord*, which appeared in a variety of late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century printed editions; this included a scene in which three devils appeared on stage in physicians' gowns, advising Nero to open his mother alive.⁶³

Stories of this sort, like the story of the Sabine women, which rooted imperial dominion in the violent control of female reproductive bodies, were given new life and force in the sixteenth century with the elaboration of theories and practices of absolutist rule. Violence and procreation lay at the heart of the prince's claim to sovereignty; monarchs welcomed texts that celebrated force as the foundation of princely power and surrounded themselves with images that portrayed the coercive and unequal relationship between the princes and their subjects in terms of the relationships between rapists and their victims, or between



Figure 5.14. Death of Agrippina. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms fr. 24392, fol. 49v, French, fifteenth century.



Figure 5.15. Death of Agrippina. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose* (Paris: Jean V  rard, 1494–1495), fol. 49v.

husbands and wives.⁶⁴ The Hapsburgs embraced this patriarchal imagery, using it to downplay the role of women in their genealogy — Charles had in fact inherited the Netherlands through his grandmother Mary of Burgundy — in order to present themselves as a lineage of fathers and sons, on the model of the Julio-Claudian line of emperors, which renewed itself by the all-male process of adoption.⁶⁵ Titian, whose workshop produced the *Fabrica* illustrations, was one of the masters of such imagery, which he used in his *Danae* (1553–1554) as well as in a series of erotic mythological scenes commissioned by Charles's son Philip, who succeeded his father as emperor in 1556.⁶⁶

Even Nero, an abject exemplum of madness and cruelty, could be incorporated into this framework, as in the *Encomium of Nero*, composed sometime before 1560 by Girolamo Cardano, an eminent physician and professor of medicine at the universities of Bologna and Pavia (not to mention an admirer of Vesalius). In this historiographic thought experiment, Cardano defended Nero's notorious actions, including his murder of his mother, as a well-intentioned, if ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to defend the Roman Empire from decline and dissolution.⁶⁷ (As a learned writer working with the ancient sources, he made no mention of her apocryphal dissection.) Not only did Agrippina deserve her violent death on account of her crimes, Cardano explained, but Nero's action was also necessary to ensure both his own safety and that of the Roman Empire as a whole. In addition to making this Machiavellian argument, Cardano also justified Nero's cruelty in providential terms, appealing to the idea of translation of empire, a staple of Hapsburg ideology, according to which God had engineered human history as a series of cycles in which one regime succeeded another, only to decay and fall in its turn. In this historical schema Nero was merely a link in the chain — a divine scourge and, ultimately, a victim of divine justice.⁶⁸ Finally,

Cardano argued, Nero's murder of his mother was excusable, since matricide is a lesser crime than parricide — a position he defended in terms of the physiology of generation. "The laws have established paternal, not maternal authority [*patriam potestatem, non maternam*]," he wrote, "and the father is the principal agent, like seed, while the mother is like the earth; and the plant owes more to the seed than the earth."⁶⁹ Because the child is more beholden for its life and existence to its father than to its mother, it owes her less loyalty and respect.

Vesalius had good reason to identify with Hapsburg imperial ideology. He was born into a medical family with several generations of medical service as court physicians and pharmacists, first to the House of Burgundy and then, in the late fifteenth century, to Charles V's grandfather Maximilian Hapsburg, who was the first of his family to become Holy Roman Emperor. Even as professor of anatomy at the University of Padua, Vesalius continued to angle for the position of imperial physician. It is certainly for this reason that he dedicated the *Fabrica* to Charles and the *Epitome* — a smaller, cheaper version of this work, also published in 1543 — to his son. The dedicatory preface of the *Fabrica* resounds with praise for "the divine Charles, the most invincible, greatest Emperor," and his innumerable virtues: "admirable learning, singular prudence, remarkable clemency, keen judgment, untiring generosity, remarkable love for men of letters and scholarship, supreme dispatch in the conduct of business," and so forth.⁷⁰ Vesalius' efforts were fruitful, and he left Padua for imperial service in 1543.

Especially in light of Vesalius' aspirations to imperial patronage, the title page of the *Fabrica* has strong affinities with contemporary stories regarding Caesar's birth and Nero's opening of Agrippina's womb.⁷¹ Attentive readers would have noticed not only that it shows a female cadaver but also that the anatomist is in

the process of dissecting her uterus, as is clear from a comparison with figure 5.1, the first woodcut of the uterus in Book 5 of the *Fabrica*. Both in its posture and in the disposition of its internal organs, the body of the woman on the title page is a mirror image of the uterine illustration, as happens when the drawing for a print is copied from another image.⁷² The anatomist's position beside the corpse evokes those of Nero and of the surgeon who performed the operation on Caesar's mother as shown in contemporary woodcuts (such as figures 5.14 and 3.7). These two scenes were not only well known but also the *only* such scenes (and the only contemporary images) to show the anatomy of a naked, or partially naked, female corpse and the inspection of her opened womb.

Thus the title page of the *Fabrica* was an ambitious exercise in mythography and iconography, designed to function like one of the erudite emblems that were all the rage in European courts. Vesalius' use of this mode of self-presentation in pursuit of princely patronage presages the efforts of a later professor at the University of Padua, Galileo Galilei, the title page of whose *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican* is one of the classics of the emblematic genre.⁷³ Whether free-standing, part of a collection, or incorporated into a title page, the sixteenth-century emblem combined highly allusive, often allegorical, images with ambiguous texts. The emblematic title page was a kind of rebus or puzzle, intentionally complicated and difficult to decipher. Like other title pages of this sort, that of the *Fabrica* was intended to work on a variety of levels, so that its full meaning emerged only through a careful consideration of both text and image. To decode it required the effort and erudition of its readers and provided the occasion for both social debate and private reflection.⁷⁴

The key to an emblem's meaning was typically encoded in the short Latin motto that accompanied it. In the case of the *Fabrica*'s title page, the words that function as the motto appear in capital

letters in the shield-shaped cartouche propped against the “stage” on which the dissection takes place: “CVM CAESAREO.” While these are the first two words of what is, in fact, the printer’s privilege — “WITH the grace and privilege of his IMPERIAL Majesty the King of France and of the Venetian Senate, as contained in their letters of license” — they also provide a clue to how the image should be read. Given the nature of the scene above it, this phrase would have called up the birth of Caesar in the mind of any literate viewer, as well as other births of this sort in classical mythography, notably that of Asclepius.⁷⁵

As the god of medicine, Asclepius is obviously relevant to Vesalius’ title page. According to Ovid’s influential account in the *Metamorphoses*, he was conceived by the nymph Coronis during an affair with Apollo, who had her killed in a fit of jealous rage. Remorseful, Apollo then cut the infant from its dead mother’s womb, functioning simultaneously in the story as the baby’s father and as the surgeon who delivered it (figure 5.16).⁷⁶ This classical scene formed part of the visual culture of childbirth in sixteenth-century Italy, where it appeared on birth plates given to wives and expectant mothers (which can hardly have been reassuring).⁷⁷

In alluding to Asclepius, Vesalius laid claim to a place in the lineage of distinguished graduates and professors of medicine in sixteenth-century Padua who had adopted Asclepius as part of their personal imagery, including Girolamo della Torre of Verona (d. 1506), della Torre’s student and compatriot Girolamo Fracastoro (d. 1553), and — in the generation after Vesalius — the anatomist Girolamo Fabrici (d. 1619, figure 5.17). (The latter two used Asclepius on their portrait medals.)⁷⁸ Asclepius also plays an important role in the bronze reliefs on della Torre’s elaborate tomb, by the Paduan sculptor Andrea Riccio, which show the master lecturing his students in the presence of Asclepius’ father, Apollo, and daughter Hygeia and making a sacrifice to Asclepius, depicted

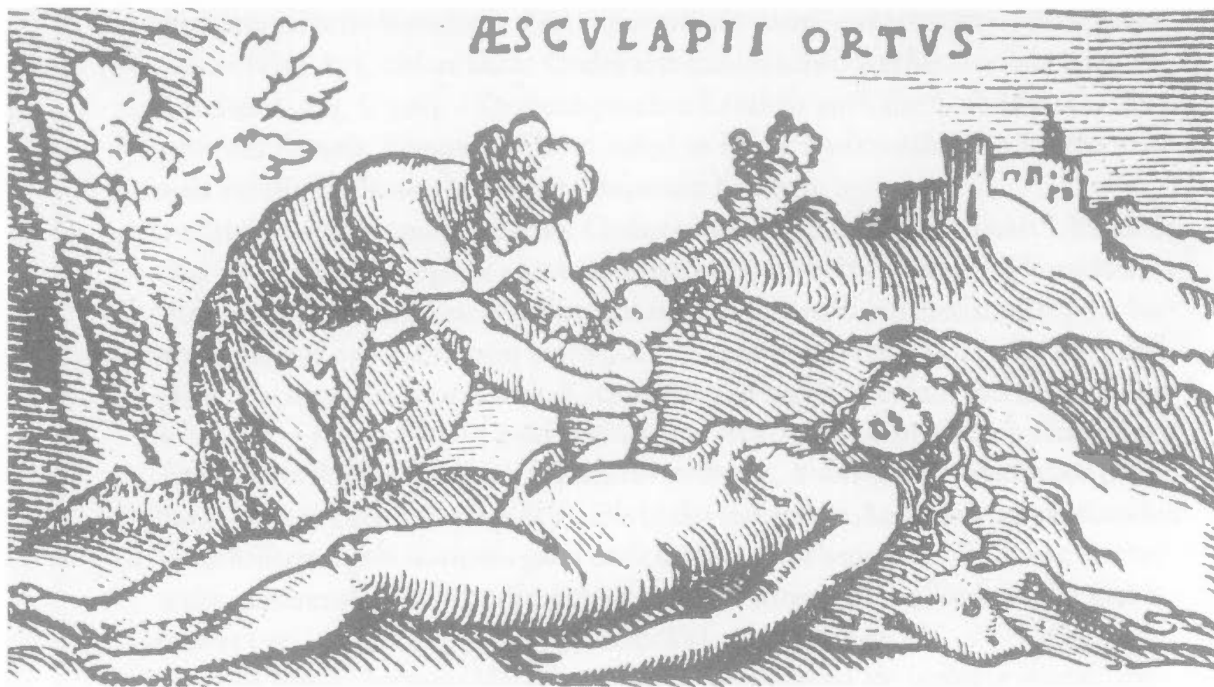


Figure 5.16. Birth of Asclepius. Alessandro Benedetti, *Habes lector studiose hoc volumine...singulis corporum morbis a capite ad pedes, generatim membratimque remedia....* (Venice: Lucantonio Giunta, 1533), title page detail.



Figure 5.17. Annibale Tosati, medal of Girolamo Fabrici of Aquapendente, London, British Museum, 598.18.3.1.

as a snake (figure 5.18).⁷⁹ There are striking compositional similarities between the tomb reliefs and Vesalius' title page; the one devoted to the death of Girolamo (figure 5.19) is a kind of missing link between the title page and Donatello's relief showing Saint Anthony and the anatomy of the miser (figures 5.7–5.9). Riccio modeled Girolamo's bier and naked corpse on Donatello's figure of the miser and created his own version of the classical architectural background, the funeral torches, and the intense reactions of the grieving crowd. Riccio's relief seems to have served, in turn, as a model for the title page, not least in terms of the series of arches that frame the crowd, while the sheep awaiting sacrifice in the foreground of the relief showing the offering to Asclepius (figure 5.18) are transmuted on the title page into animals awaiting dissection.

The title page of the *Fabrica* plays with these Asclepian associations and with allusions to "Caesarean" birth. On one level, the scene asks the reader to reimagine it as Apollo's extraction of Asclepius from the uterus of his dead lover. Here the infant, Vesalius' "son," does not appear on the title page, for it is in fact his book, the *Fabrica* itself, which, like Asclepius in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, will give "health and strength to all on earth."⁸⁰ Vesalius emphasized this theme in his dedicatory epistle, where he referred to medicine as both the "Apolline discipline" and the "art of the Asclepiads."⁸¹ As Apollo did with Asclepius, Vesalius has both fathered his book and delivered it to the world.

On another level, the title page evokes the birth of Caesar, which contemporary popular historiography associated with the founding of the Roman Empire. In this way, it identifies Vesalius' publication of the *Fabrica* with the foundation of a new, heroic empire of anatomy — a "reborn art of dissection," as he called it in his dedicatory preface, which serves as a manifesto for this new regime.⁸² Vesalius' new approach will replace the old,

degenerate medical order of earlier centuries, riddled with errors and misconceptions regarding the human body that had arisen as physicians increasingly distanced themselves from the world of matter and the body by delegating manual operation, especially surgery, to lower practitioners and retreating to the world of disputation and books. By reintegrating the more philosophical discipline of *physica* (which corresponded roughly to internal medicine) with the manual art of surgery, Vesalius presented himself as superseding the unproductive division of medical labor that supposedly characterized the medieval centuries and reviving medicine as it was practiced in the ancient world. His models were Hippocrates and, especially, Galen, who modeled this integrated approach to medical theory and practice and “frequently repeat[ed] how much he enjoyed working with his hands.”⁸³

Anatomy was the key to this revival, as the particular discipline that bridged *physica* and surgery, since it simultaneously illuminated the general structure and functioning of the internal organs and helped practitioners improve practical techniques of bloodletting, setting fractures, and the like. According to Vesalius, this discipline, so prized by ancient writers, had since been “ruined” by physicians who focused only on the viscera that concerned internal illness, rather than the bones, muscles, and nerves that were important to the work of surgeons, and who, furthermore, insisted on teaching anatomy without themselves touching the cadaver, leaving it to barbers and surgeons. In lessons of this sort (as illustrated in figures 2.5 and 3.1),

some perform dissections of the human body while others recite the anatomical information. While the latter in their egregious conceit squawk like jackdaws from their lofty professorial chairs things they have never done but only memorize from the books of others or see written down, the former are so ignorant of languages that they are



Figure 5.18. Girolamo della Torre makes a sacrifice to Asclepius. Riccio (Andrea Briosco), bronze relief from the tomb of Girolamo and Marcantonio della Torre, Verona, San Fermo Maggiore, ca. 1516–1521.

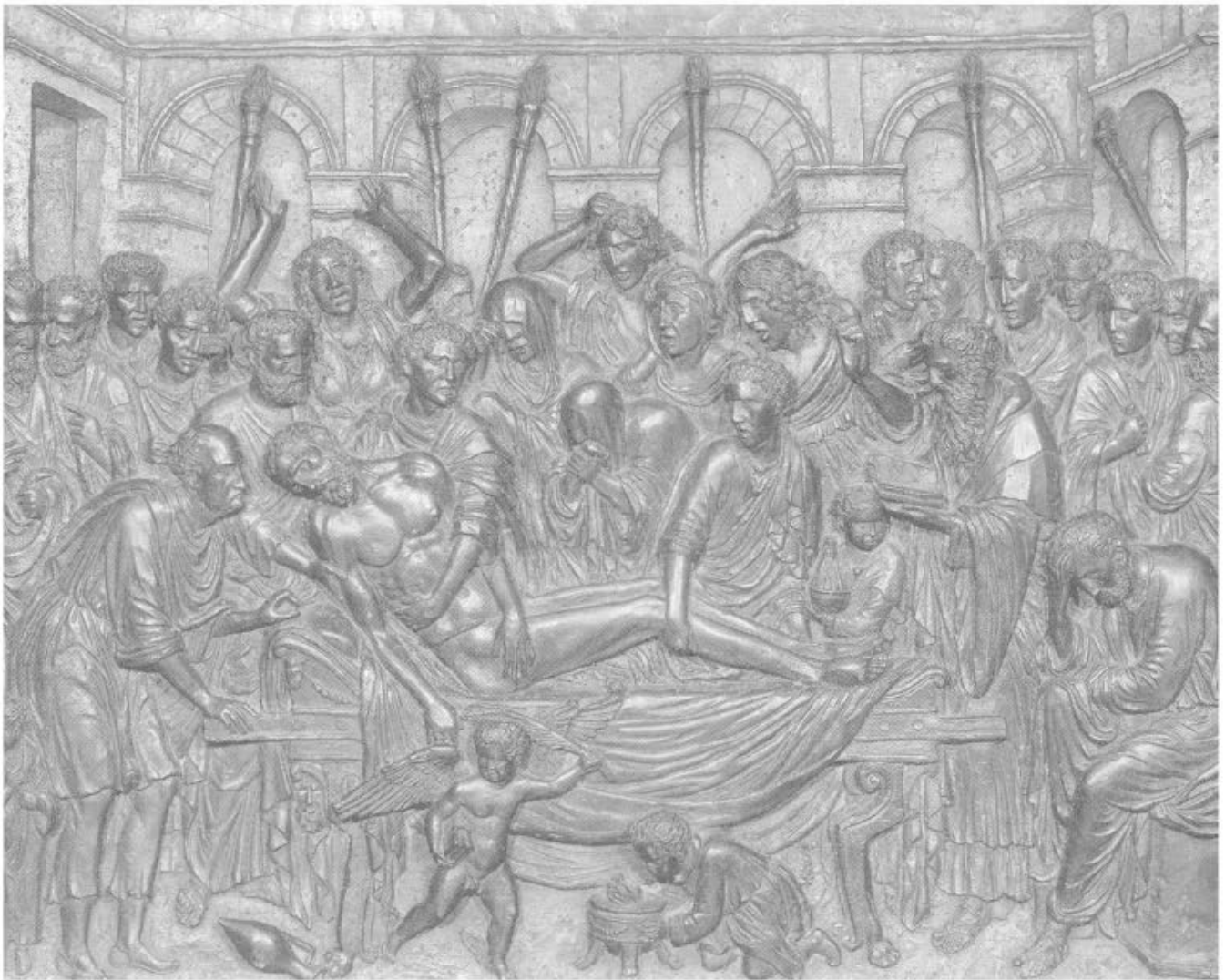


Figure 5.19. Death of Girolamo della Torre. Riccio (Andrea Briosco), bronze relief for tomb of Girolamo and Marcantonio della Torre, as in figure 5.18.

unable to explain dissections to an audience and they butcher the things they are meant to demonstrate. . . . And as everything is being thus wrongly taught in the universities and as days pass in silly questions, fewer things are placed before the spectators in all that confusion than a butcher in a market could teach a doctor.⁸⁴

In line with the theme of “Caesarean” birth, Vesalius studded his retelling of the history of medicine in the preface with metaphors of renewal and rebirth. In it, he positioned himself as both the restorer of the lost empire of medicine and the founder of a new dynasty of great physicians, on the model of Apollo’s establishment of the Asclepian line. This theme resonates cleverly with contemporary Hapsburg mythology, which presented the Hapsburg rulers as heirs and restorers of the Roman Empire, elected by providence as the culminating stage in a sequence of divinely sanctioned regimes that began with the priest-kings of the Old Testament.⁸⁵ Just as the gods chose Charles V to preside over a dazzling cultural revival, the preface continues, they selected Vesalius to resurrect the science of anatomy. “Not wishing to be the only one to fall idle while all others are applying themselves with such success to some common topic of interest, or to be unworthy of my ancestors,” he wrote, “it was my thought that this branch of natural philosophy should be recalled from the dead.”⁸⁶ Vesalius has snatched anatomy from the jaws of death, just as Charles resuscitated the Roman Empire, just as the midwife saved the infant Caesar, and just as Apollo rescued Asclepius from Coronis’ womb. In his time, thanks in large part to Vesalius’ own efforts, the art of dissection has been “reborn.”⁸⁷

Vesalius’ invocation of “Caesarean” birth, a story of beginnings, resonates with his invocation of the dissection of Agrippina, a story of endings. As the last, deluded emperor of the Julio-Claudian line, Nero represents the old, bad order of anatomy in Vesalius’

emblematic scheme; like medieval physicians, divorced from the world of manual practice, he directed others to open Agrippina's body, as described in all the texts and images of this famous scene (for example, figures 5.14 and 5.15). The result was sterility and damnation; Nero's hope of bearing his own child, in the version of the story recorded in the *Golden Legend*, ended in the production of a deformed abortion and ultimately in the emperor's own death (see Chapter Three). In contrast, the renewed or "Apolline" phase of the discipline depended on the willingness of physicians to perform their own dissections, on the model of Apollo's opening of Coronis and of Vesalius' own practice as depicted on the title page. Like Apollo, and unlike Nero, Vesalius has managed successfully to both father and deliver a child, the *Fabrica*, which marks the reinstatement of anatomy as a vital, progressive field of study. The fertility of this new approach to anatomy is emphasized by the size and energy of the crowd on the title page, riveted by Vesalius' words and deeds.

The designer of the *Fabrica*'s title page used a wealth of erudite imagery to fashion an emblem aimed to work on multiple levels. Most obviously, this showed Vesalius with his students and with a dissected cadaver, signaling that this was an anatomy textbook — albeit a textbook with a difference, as the choice of a female corpse and the unconventional disposition of conventional elements make evident; this clearly referred to the old idea of "women's secrets," in which the mysteries of sexuality and generation, embodied in the female organs of generation, stood for the most difficult and inaccessible of the body's truths. On a second level, for those who chose to open the book and read the preface, the title page illustrated Vesalius' specific claim to originality — the fact that he had rejected the medieval separation between the manual art of surgery and the intellectual art of *physica*; dissecting his own corpses allowed him to correct the errors of past anat-

mists, both ancient and medieval, by seeing for himself. (In this, as in a number of his other claims, Vesalius strategically omitted predecessors such as Jacopo Berengario of Carpi, who had made the same point about their own work.) On a third level, for those familiar with two famous monuments with Paduan connections, Donatello's fifteenth-century altarpiece for the basilica of Saint Anthony and the early sixteenth-century tomb of Girolamo della Torre in Verona, it associated the young Vesalius both with the patron saint of Padua and with one of his eminent predecessors in the medical faculty. Finally, for connoisseurs of Roman history and classical mythology familiar with the stories of the death of Nero and the births of Caesar and Asclepius, the opened uterus of the woman on the title page echoed contemporary images of princely authority and masculine autonomy, evoking translations of empire and reinforcing Vesalius' self-identification as the triumphant founder of a new medical and anatomical regime.

Experience and the Limits of Compassion

In its use of the imagery of gendered violence associated with the ideology of princely power in sixteenth-century Italy, the title page of the *Fabrica* appears to bear out recent interpretations of natural inquiry in early modern Europe as characterized by a growing affective and epistemological distance between subject and object, figured in gendered terms. In *The Body Emblazoned*, for example, Jonathan Sawday describes sixteenth-century anatomy as "a science of *seeing*," represented metaphorically as "a male science which observed and a female subject who was observed . . . , an active male gaze confronting a passive female subject."⁸⁸ Sawday argues that the distance between the male viewers (those portrayed on the title page as well as the readers of the *Fabrica*), on the one hand, and the female object of dissection, on the other, is exaggerated not only by the gender of the participants

but also by the fact that the cadaver was that of an executed criminal; as both a woman and a convict, she lies outside the realm of identification and compassion.⁸⁹

While this reading captures important elements of the image on the title page, it oversimplifies the case by treating the title page in isolation from the image with which it was associated in the frontmatter of the *Fabrica*: Vesalius' author portrait (figure 5.20), which acts as a pendant to the great dissection scene. The two woodcuts were clearly intended to work together; although the surroundings are different, each shows the anatomist standing next to an identically equipped dissecting table, wearing the same clothes. Like the dedicatory preface, both illustrate Vesalius' emphasis on the manual aspects of medicine and on direct experience, while the classical column or pilaster in the background of the author portrait recalls the classicizing architecture of the title page, as well as the preface's classicizing theme. At the same time, however, the two images exist in counterpoint, embodying two contrasting models of visual experience.⁹⁰ If the title page reflects the newer model Sawday describes, which disentangled the seer and the object, repressing the identification between the two and reserving subjectivity to the former, the author portrait expresses an older model of vision premised on the interaction and identification of seer and seen, in line with late medieval Christian devotional practice, which I described in Chapter One. Organized around meditation on images, particularly images of the suffering Christ, in accordance with the etymology of "compassion," this practice encouraged Christians to "suffer with" the martyrs in their agony, Mary at the Crucifixion, and Jesus on the cross.⁹¹

The author portrait shows Vesalius gazing at the viewer while holding the partially dissected arm of a large, well-proportioned male cadaver, whose long hair and draped hips strongly recall contemporary representations of the crucified Christ (for example,

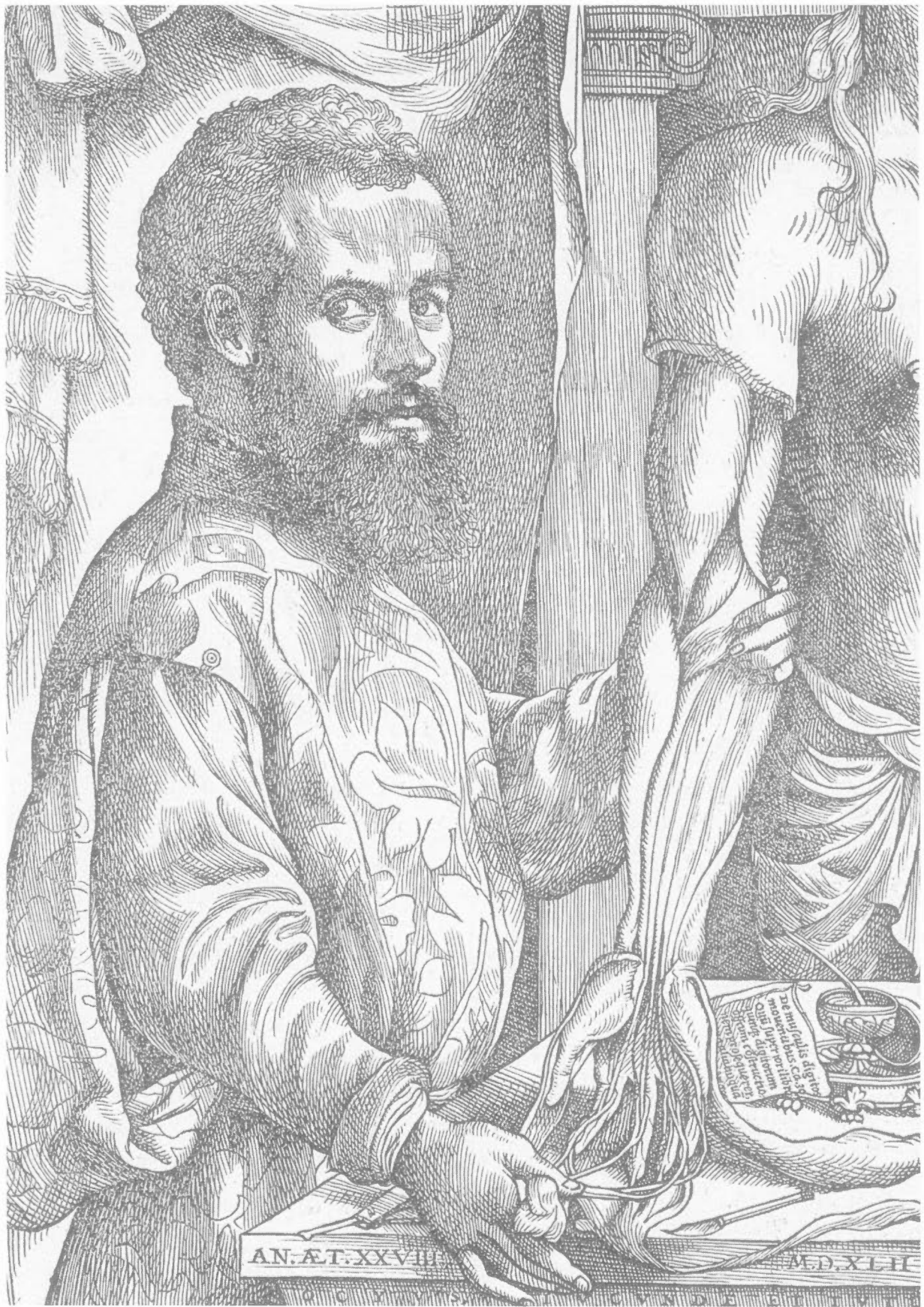


Figure 5.20. Author portrait. Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, sig. [6v].

figure 5.11). He gently supports the cadaver's elbow with his left hand, while he holds the tendons of its right hand with his own; this gesture emphasizes the identification between the anatomist and his object and echoes a common motif in images of the deposition of Christ from the cross and the lamentation over his corpse.⁹² Like the title page, this image has the hallmarks of an emblem. The inscription on the lip of the table records Vesalius' age, twenty-eight, when the portrait was made in 1542, a common element in author portraits; beneath it, barely visible on the apron of the dissecting table, is the motto "Ocyus, iucunde et tuto," a version of a quotation attributed to Asclepiades by the first-century Roman medical author Celsus, recommending that treatment be performed "safely, quickly, and pleasantly."⁹³ This recalls the caption of Berengario's woodcut of the crucified Christ, which demonstrated the muscles of the arms and the front of the body; its function, according to Berengario, was to make doctors more knowledgeable and cautious in their operations, so that they "do not become like the torturers of Christ" (figure 5.13).⁹⁴ The piece of paper or vellum next to the cadaver's hand on the surface of the table reads, "On the muscles that move the fingers, Chapter 30. Since in the preceding book I investigated the construction of the bones of the five fingers."

As many historians have pointed out, the author portrait embodies Vesalius' manifesto in the preface regarding the need to reintegrate the textual expertise of the physician with the manual expertise of the surgeon. The hand looms large in the preface as the instrument by which this integration will be achieved. Vesalius is equally adept at manipulating the scalpel and the pen, both of which lie on the dissecting table beside him; the scrap of writing next to the inkpot is a version of the opening words of his chapter on the muscles of the hand.⁹⁵ Equally important, the author portrait restores the Christian element that was muted in the

title page: the association of the anatomical cadaver with the dead Christ, as in figure 5.13. The juxtaposition of the two men's hands, so similar in size and function, also illustrates the identification and mutual interaction of anatomist and cadaver, forcing the reader to confront dissection as the intimate encounter of two human bodies. This intimacy is enhanced not only by the fact that both figures are male but also by the private setting; the drapery behind Vesalius suggests an indoor, domestic space. The visual references to the Christian themes of compassion and redemption emphasize both the piety of the anatomist and the dignity of the corpse. This image in no way obscures the dissection's associations with judgment, execution, and suffering; rather, it relates them to the Passion, surrounding them with a powerful charisma.

The effect of the title page is completely different. Everything in it serves to suppress the viewers' identification with the cadaver. A number of visual devices distance the reader from the scene, including the use of symmetry and perspective — elements that are distinctly muted in the author portrait. While the portrait assumes a viewer close to and on a level with both anatomist and cadaver, the viewpoint of the title page lies well above that of the central group of figures, corresponding to that of a student far from the action, sitting on the top rank of a set of bleachers symmetrical to the one behind the dissecting table. This implied distance is further exaggerated by the female sex of cadaver. Not only is she supine and inert, in contrast to the energetic poses of audience members, but the title page also goes out of its way to emphasize the violation of propriety and female honor involved in the display of a woman's naked body to a crowd of eager men. The corpse is displayed in a way calculated to call maximum attention to her genitals, in the style of contemporary erotic prints (such as figure 5.21).⁹⁶ Agency is reserved to the anatomist and his male

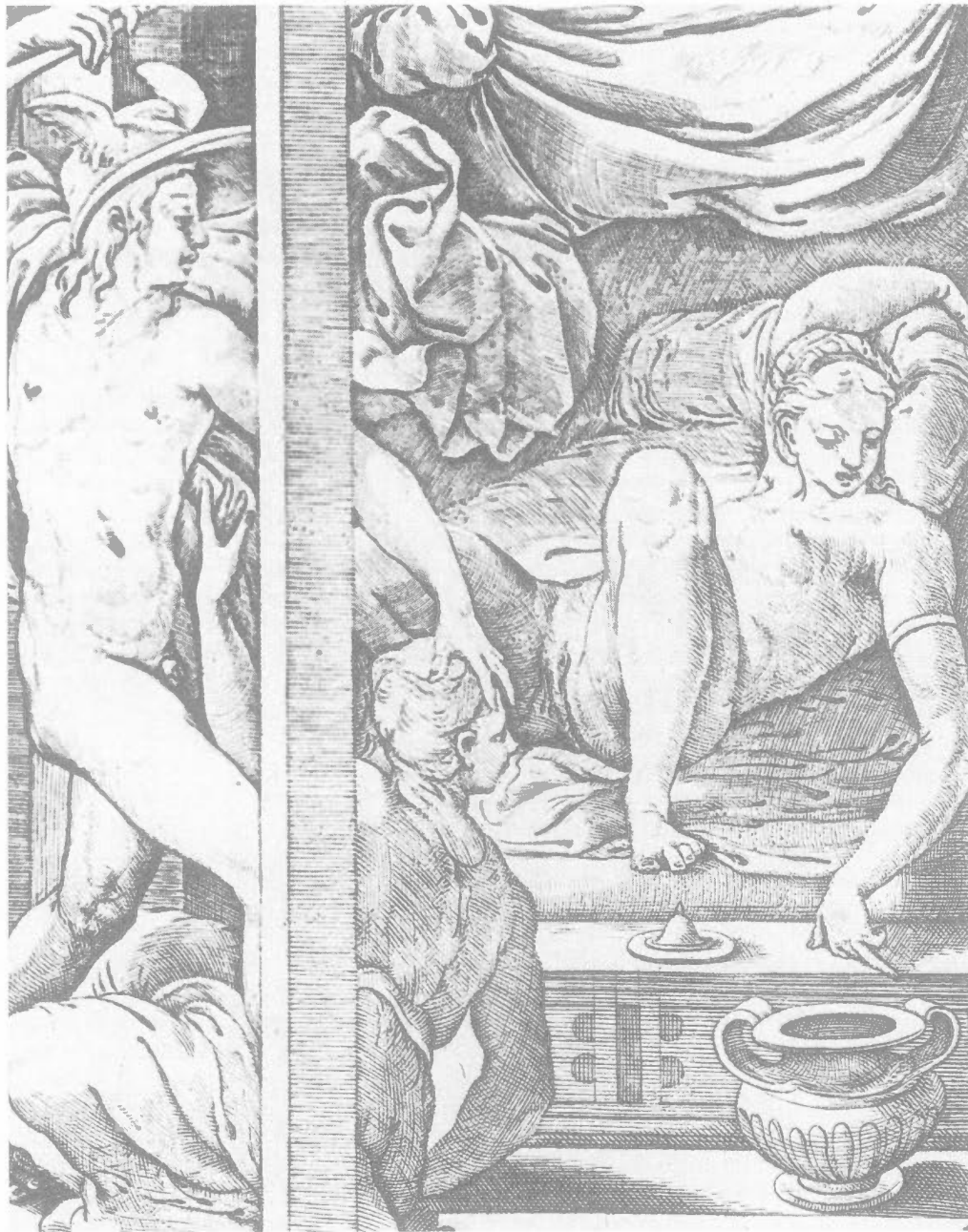


Figure 5.21. Jacopo Caraglio after Perino del Vaga, *Mercury and Aglaurus*, Rome, Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, FC 5942, late 1520s.

audience, while the woman's body functions as a source of information and helps create the illusion of depth by carrying the perspectival construction of the space. This use of the female body — which was by no means limited to the *Fabrica* or the sixteenth century — not only deprives her of subjectivity but also, as Linda Hentschel has argued, sexualizes the act of vision itself.⁹⁷

The two models of vision reflected in the author portrait and the title page — one based on identification, the other on (gendered) difference — did not exhaust the forms of seeing available in the mid-sixteenth century. (Other such forms included the decoding of visual emblems for their allegorical meaning and the manipulation of images, either imaginatively, as in the art of “artificial” memory, or manually, as in the case of layered “flap anatomies” such as Vesalius' *Epitome* of 1543.)⁹⁸ Nor were they understood as mutually exclusive; the two could coexist, as in the *Fabrica*, doing different types of work as the context required. In this respect, they were reinforced by contemporary views of sex difference, which were also premised simultaneously on similarity and difference. From the point of view of the Galenic theory that framed Vesalius' (and Berengario's) anatomy, women's bodies were anatomically the same as men's, albeit with their genitals inverted, while in other respects — their remarkable reproductive capability, their need to menstruate, the constitutional weakness and susceptibility to disease that constantly compromised their mental and physical well-being — they seemed almost to be another species.⁹⁹ In illustrating the female cadaver's genitals, rather than the many parts she shared with male bodies, the title page strictly limits her availability as an object of compassion and of knowing like by like.

The title page's focus on the female genitals recalls the long tradition that identified the mysteries of sexuality and generation as the “secrets of women.” In this tradition, women were both

knowers and known. In the works of learned natural philosophers and medical writers, “women’s” (often “old women’s”) knowledge stood for all nonliterate, experience-based, and orally transmitted knowledge; women were understood to have a particular understanding of other women’s bodies, based on their experience as mothers, matrons, and midwives. Over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as I described in Chapter Two, Italian physicians increasingly concerned themselves with the reproductive care of women – with the management of fertility and pregnancy, though not with childbirth itself. In the process, they recast the secrets of women in terms of the secrecy inherent in the structure of women’s bodies, a proper object of learned inquiry, rather than as women’s knowledge, inaccessible to men. The story of the title page’s female cadaver, which Vesalius told in his chapter on the uterus, echoes this change. A criminal who had pretended to be pregnant in order to avoid execution, she had been examined by midwives by order of the *podestà*. They concluded that she was not pregnant, a judgment that Vesalius was able to transform into certain knowledge by anatomical demonstration, trumping their conjectural form of knowledge, which was based on haphazard experience.¹⁰⁰

I have not yet discussed the only other woman to appear on the title page besides the Paduan criminal whose body is the focus of the scene. She stands at the back, one of two figures wedged between the second and third columns from the right; her headcloth, which wraps loosely around her head and neck, unlike the more closely fitted hoods of men in the audience, identifies her as a matron and a working woman – possibly even a birth attendant or midwife (compare figures 2.6, 3.4, and 3.7).¹⁰¹ Like the men under the portico, she seems to have strayed into the dissecting theater and found herself transfixed by curiosity concerning the scene below. Unlike them, however, she is an incongruous

figure — I know of no evidence that women ever attended public anatomies in mid-sixteenth-century Italy — whose presence invites speculation. Perhaps she is like the women in Berengario's illustrations, who peer curiously at their dissected uteruses, eager for the information about their own bodies that only the anatomist can reveal (figures 4.2 and 4.3). Perhaps she is one of the midwives who examined the body of the condemned woman before her death for signs of pregnancy and is waiting for Vesalius' confirmation of her judgment: certainty requires familiarity with the textual tradition and practical experience with human bodies, a set of qualifications that was found only in learned men. While it excluded most men, this model of learned expertise excluded *all* women, depriving them of their traditional authority concerning the illnesses of the female genitals, as well as the secrets of sexuality and generation — a phenomenon that Monica H. Green calls the "masculine birth of gynecology."¹⁰²

In ending on this note, I do not mean to evoke nostalgia for a lost age when women cared for other women, honing their skills in obstetrics and gynecology and passing that knowledge down to later generations of women, until the anatomists or the judges who presided over the witch trials of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries took it all away.¹⁰³ This wishful fiction, which continues to dominate much popular historiography, is merely the inverse of the myth that women were the jealous proprietors of secrets concerning generation and female sexuality that they withheld from men; the creation of learned male clerics, this myth reflected a culture of misogyny that identified women with lust and lies. In point of fact, there is very little evidence that even wealthy women received expert prenatal or postnatal care before the late fourteenth or the fifteenth century beyond that provided by kinswomen, servants, and neighbors; medieval midwives seem to have been specialists in the delivery of children,

not in obstetrics or gynecology more generally, and it is even difficult to find references to them as an occupational group before the thirteenth century — one of the many areas regarding the history of women's health care in which much more research is needed.¹⁰⁴

This is not to denigrate the dedication and skill of the women, rich and poor, who offered one another advice and treatment and who certainly had more experience in the care of female bodies than most of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century physicians who claimed to be authorities on it. It is rather to emphasize, as Green argues, that gynecology and obstetrics were not only an area in which expertise and authority were disjunct in medieval and Renaissance Europe; they were also an area in which the culture precluded women's developing broad-based expertise. Because the vast majority of women were illiterate, especially the working women from whose ranks midwives and female practitioners were drawn, and because Italian midwives were not organized into guilds or the kind of occupational association that would formalize the oral and empirical transmission of knowledge, there was a strict limit on their ability to pass on the knowledge that any woman or group of women might accumulate over a lifetime of practice — especially regarding unusual or problematic conditions — or even to create records for personal use.¹⁰⁵ There were no Martha Ballards in late medieval Italy; levels of female literacy in eighteenth-century Maine far exceeded those in Renaissance Italy.¹⁰⁶ Women were undoubtedly constantly creating new knowledge concerning pregnancy and women's illnesses, but they were unlikely to record it for themselves or to communicate it beyond their immediate friends and collaborators, as Guglielmo of Saliceto pointed out as early as the thirteenth century.¹⁰⁷ Three hundred years later, the woman in the back row of the spectators on the title page of the *Fabrica* may have had a wealth of wisdom

concerning the structure, function, and afflictions of the female genitals, far surpassing that of Vesalius, but in his world of literacy and printing, that knowledge was not so much secret as fleeting, lost almost as soon as it was found.

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Epilogue

What does it mean to know our bodies? Although my book focuses on the opening of women's corpses in late medieval and Renaissance Italy, it is part of a larger story in which anatomical knowledge gained by exploring the dissected body became a way to think about the self. Literate Europeans had long experienced and described their internal bodily processes in terms of thermal and fluid dynamics: the flow and interplay of vapors and liquids, which the learned parsed as including not only blood and the four humors but also substances such as the radical moisture, airy spirits, and nutritive chyle.¹ The internal organs played a vague and relatively subordinate role in this drama of heat and moisture; in lay writing, as opposed to professional medical works, they appear as generally localized regions — the “heart” as a figure for the self dedicated to the love of God or others, the “stomach” as the site of courage and engagement — without much topological specificity. It is often difficult to determine whether such descriptions were intended to be literal or metaphorical, as in the case of the birth of Christ in the heart. Each organ had its own associations and its own place in descriptions of human experience, but it was rarely placed in a clear relationship with the other organs or visualized as part of an integrated spatial whole.