

# Staging Anatomies

## Dissection and Spectacle in Early Stuart Tragedy



Hillary M. Nunn

LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC CULTURES OF EARLY MODERNITY

# STAGING ANATOMIES

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# Staging Anatomies

## Dissection and Spectacle in Early Stuart Tragedy

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# THE Rauens Almanacke.

The Dominion of the Moone in Mans bodie.

Aries The head and face.

Gemini  
Armes &  
Shoulders

Leo  
Heart &  
backe:  
Libra  
Reines &  
loynes.

Sagitari  
the  
Thighes  
Aquarius  
Legges.



pisces The Feet.

Taurus  
Necke &  
throat  
Cancer.  
Brest sto  
macke &  
Lunges.  
Virgo  
Guts &  
belley,

Scorpio  
secrets &  
bladder,

Capricor  
nus the  
knees.

Figure 1: Moon's Man figure from Thomas Dekker's *The Rauens Almanacke*, 1609

## Introduction

# Reading Beyond the Lines: Reanimating Early Modern Anatomy

"At the beginning of euerie Almanacke," notes Thomas Dekker, "it is the fashion to haue the body of a man drawne as you see, and not onely baited, but bitten and shot at by wilde beasts and monsters." With these opening lines to *The Rauens Almanacke* (1609), Dekker exposes more than the routine use of what he calls "Moon's Man" figures (Figure 1);<sup>1</sup> he also reveals his own era's preoccupation with images of the human body under siege. Dekker dwells sardonically on his initial observations, wondering at the motives behind such graphic depictions of the human body:

But how ridiculous a shape do they bestowe vpon the silly wretch? hee standes as if he had beene some notorious malefactor, and being stript stark naked, to goe to execution: do not those Roundels hang about him, shew like so many pardons, tyed to the partes of his body with Labels? or rather does hee not looke (when he lyes along) like a theefe begd for an Anatomy in Surgeons Hall, (so many Barbers figured / in those beastes) slashing and slycing, and quartering & cutting him vp? truly he does.<sup>2</sup>

Dekker asks these questions partly to set apart his own use of such a conventional drawing, and his commentary indeed demands that his readers to look at his Moon's Man in a new way. He asks them to consider the image not simply as a standardly coded representation conveying information about astrological signs, but as a depiction of an actual human body subject to dynamic change. It is even more striking that the forces Dekker sees governing these processes stem from a source far more earth-bound than the otherworldly realm of astrology. In his view, the torment the Moon's Man endures originates instead from the relentlessly corporeal world of early Stuart London, and, even more specifically, from violent citydwellers. First, the Moon's Man – already convicted in Dekker's narrative of some criminal wrongdoing – falls into the hands of the state. There, Dekker imagines the Moon's Man undergoing a transformation that Michel Foucault and many scholars after him have clearly outlined: his body ceases to be his own, becoming instead a vehicle through which the crown displays its authority over the individual – and, by extension, over the community – via the infliction of disfiguring punishment that kills (and sometimes pardons) those under its power.<sup>3</sup>

The body of the Moon's Man, however, serves as more than an emblem of the state's power to kill; he is not just "some notorious malefactor" but a "theefe begd for an Anatomy in Surgeons Hall." Indeed, as we shall see, most bodies used in

official dissections in early Stuart London were those of executed criminals, and *The Rauens Almanacke* relies on the reader's knowledge of this fact. While executioners had been publicly reducing criminal bodies to unrecognizable parts for centuries, the notion that such violent dismemberment could prove medically valuable still proved startling, even shocking, to many of the city's inhabitants – and Dekker's description of the Moon's Man's fate clearly resonates with popular apprehension toward these supposedly scholarly anatomies. At the same time, the opening image of *The Rauens Almanacke* reveals an undeniable curiosity regarding these dissections among Londoners with no professional connections to medical practice.

Dekker's offhand disgust – and fascination – for the "slashing and slycing" the Moon's Man endures after death underscores the extent to which the processes of anatomical dissection had become a part of London's popular discourse. Confidently calling these anatomical procedures into action, Dekker prompts his readers to see the results of the cuts that no barber-surgeon has yet inflicted upon the corpse. The drawing as we have it, after all, shows the man's body utterly intact – in fact, he appears to still be alive – and it undergoes "quartering & cutting" not at the anatomist's knifepoint but in the imaginations of those who envision Dekker's narrative set into motion as they gaze upon the picture. "[D]oes hee not looke," Dekker asks his readers rhetorically, "like a theefe begd for an Anatomy in Surgeons Hall?," fully confident that they can imagine the scene of dissection. In early Stuart London, his assumption may well have rung true, for the anatomy demonstrations Dekker calls upon served as entertainment for audiences much like, if not identical to, those who read his *Almanacke* and, just as importantly, saw his plays in the theatre.

Incorporating views of anatomy's significance from a broad range of sources, the chapters that follow will explore the ways in which early Stuart dramatists call upon this increasing fascination with anatomical dissection – and its influence on popular conceptions of the body's flesh – to shape their tragedies. Specifically, I will consider the significance of the visible body itself as a concrete object of public scrutiny within the theatre, examining the ways that early Stuart playwrights capitalized on the similarities between anatomical and commercial theatres to add new layers of meaning to both the dramatic portrayal of physical mutilation and the act of witnessing such staged violence. In doing so, I will focus on the presentations of bodies and their parts on the early Stuart commercial stage, particularly in London's indoor playhouses like the Blackfriars and the Cockpit. The dynamics of such feigned theatrical destruction of the human body, I argue, closely mirror those of the Barber-Surgeons' anatomical dissections, which proved popular theatrical events even among Londoners without any professional connections to the medical realm.

Many scholars have examined the human body's importance as a carrier of political, religious, and social meaning in early modern London, yet few have considered how watching bodies undergo what are taken to be gruesome transformations on stage might have affected audience perceptions of dramatic tragedies. Enlightening studies by Gail Kern Paster and Michael C. Schoenfeldt

have addressed the influence of the body's humours in determining an individual's social role and sense of self, offering vivid and compelling arguments involving bodily processes such as menstruation, lactation, and digestion; the visible obliteration of the body so integral to staged anatomy, however, lies just beyond their scope.<sup>4</sup> Studies that deal specifically with early modern anatomy's popularity have tended to consider the body's significance in relation to early modern notions of state power, conceptions of individuality, and modes of written literary creation. Jonathan Sawday's *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, for example, explores connections between anatomical practice and the era's rhetorical and religious tropes of discovery and exposure. The essays collected in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, edited by David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, provide valuable readings regarding the significance attached to individual organs and systems in early modern thought, offering secondary consideration to the processes that isolate the body's elements from one another.<sup>5</sup> In another recent study, Michael Neill argues that, in *Othello*, Iago performs what amounts to psychological dissections of his adversaries, concluding that the play's characters speak in anatomy-tinged words. Offering the intriguing comparison between the human body and the Renaissance stage's discovery space, Neill argues that human flesh as used in the era's plays "was imagined as inscribed with the occult truths of the inner self" and "existed to challenge the curious gaze, as if it were there *to be opened*." Early Stuart tragedies, with their relentless obsession with acts of spying, torture, and bodily mutilation, no doubt uphold this observation, yet Neill looks past the bloodshed in his examination of anatomy's influence on the early modern stage. Instead, he quickly concludes that the mysteries contained in the dramatic body "were not merely physiological, but moral-ontological, and psychological."<sup>6</sup> As a result, Neill's arguments strive to elucidate the way that the bodies of individual characters conceal and eventually reveal their particular obsessions and worldviews, and their physical presences as they might have been manifested on the early modern stage become less significant to his argument as it evolves.

My readings approach the issue of anatomy's influence on the theatre from a markedly different, though not conflicting, direction. The playhouse community, not the individual dramatic character, serves as my focus, and I will examine the ways in which early Stuart notions of anatomy manifest themselves on the theatre's stage not only in words but also in more tangible and more immediately visible – that is, more bodily – forms. In short, I will explore scenes that enact the physical, rather than the metaphorical, violation of the human body. Scenes of bloodshed, I argue, call upon playgoers' curiosity about the physical makeup of the human body not only to provoke their horror, but to invoke their sympathy and even to invite contemplation. Staged violence, like early modern anatomical dissection, carries with it messages of state power and religious doctrine, offering viewers vivid spectacles that also reinforce the human body's social significance. Mimicking the cutting of the anatomy theatre onstage, early Stuart tragedies sometimes invite spectators to peer into a character's flesh, offering up the actor's body so that the audience might examine the inner reaches of a character to judge his true nature; at

other points, dramas call on dissection less overtly, staging scenes that prompt playgoers to invoke the penetrating gazes nurtured in the anatomical theatre to examine actors whose bodies remain unviolated. The violent mechanisms that produce such vivid onstage images prove essential to the audience's involvement in the drama, transforming those who watch the play into participants whose refined habits of viewing help not just to create the action but to imbue it and the bodies displayed onstage before them with tragic meaning.

### **Public Dissection in London: An Overview**

In early modern London, public interest in human dissections and playhouse dramas developed nearly simultaneously. In 1540, Henry VIII presented the city's Barber-Surgeons' Company their official charter, which granted the organization the corpses of four executed criminals a year for public anatomy lectures;<sup>7</sup> twenty-five years later, Elizabeth I granted four bodies a year for dissections to the College of Physicians, the Barber-Surgeons' university-trained rivals.<sup>8</sup> Few records survive regarding the conditions of dissection at the College of Physicians; the Barber-Surgeons, on the other hand, have left tantalizing clues as to the nature of their anatomical practices. Because the Barber-Surgeons had no permanent facilities for such demonstrations, these anatomies took place in their hall's kitchen and were scrupulously planned to ensure that the proceedings would maintain a professional, scientific air.<sup>9</sup> The stern atmosphere of these dissections, however, then dissolved into the festive spirit of the banquet hall, for the guild traditionally provided a lavish meal for those who attended its anatomy lectures. Anatomy became so firmly associated with the Company that, in 1636, the Barber-Surgeons commissioned famed architect Inigo Jones to design the company's Anatomical Theatre as a permanent home for their dissections. As we shall see, Jones's plans for the Anatomical Theatre bore a surprising – and significant – resemblance to those of dramatic theatres he designed, most notably those of London's Cockpit.

The similarities in Jones's architectural drawings suggest that public anatomies were taking on the characteristics of staged drama during the same years that the city's theatres were establishing their position within London's civic life – and that actors and anatomists played to similar audiences in similar venues. While serving different purposes, the spectacles they presented both manipulated the human body in front of an audience to communicate strikingly similar social, political, spiritual, and even scientific themes. Early modern comedies and tragedies alike abound with spoken references to dismemberment, as when King Lear, in his famous appraisal of his traitorous daughter, declares, "[L]et them anatomize Regan" (3.6.31).<sup>10</sup> This talk of mutilation anticipates the staged blinding of Gloucester and mirrors similarly graphic scenes of dismemberment in earlier tragedies like *Titus Andronicus* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, to name but two. Such theatrical violations of the body grew more common – and often bolder – as the practice of dissection gradually gained acceptance within the English medical community. In the years following Elizabeth I's death and preceding the civil war –

the early Stuart years that will serve as the primary focus of my study – these playhouse plots reached their bloodiest extremes, mirroring not only the process of dissection but also the habits of viewing and interpreting exposed human bodies that anatomical presentations fostered among their viewers.

Just as commercial theatres were thriving in London, dissection was becoming a larger part of both medical education and the popular mindset in England. In their own records, both the Barber-Surgeons' Company and the College of Physicians refer to their anatomy demonstrations as public but give little indication of who actually attended these events.<sup>11</sup> Further evidence, however, shows that the demonstrations enjoyed considerable popularity among the citizenry, so much so that neither the Barber-Surgeons nor the Physicians could house the crowds of onlookers, many of whom had no professional involvement with these medical organizations, during the times of dissection. In the words of historian Sir George Clark, the dissections at the Physicians' Hall "provided a spectacle so acceptable to the taste of the first Elizabethan age that we may suppose as many distinguished strangers were invited as the cramped accommodation of the College could contain."<sup>12</sup> By 1583, the close quarters of the Physicians' Hall led the physicians to construct an anatomy theatre, the first in London, in which to stage their dissections.<sup>13</sup> Among those individuals who attended was Sir Simonds D'Ewes, a nobleman with no professional connection to medicine who eagerly observed William Harvey perform a three-day-long anatomy at the College's Hall in March of 1622, which he watched with "profit and delight, the smell excepted."<sup>14</sup>

London's public at large proved more concerned with the anatomies held by the Barber-Surgeons, whose annals mention the presence at dissections of "gentlemen that do come and mark the Anatomy to learn knowledge."<sup>15</sup> Not all of the spectators at the Barber-Surgeons' anatomies, however, acted in the gentlemanly fashion suggested by the account in the annals. As the records of the company's governing court reveal, the curious public – and the surgeons themselves – often behaved rowdily during the demonstrations. "[T]here hath bene," the court noted in 1635, the year before it set aside funds for the construction of its anatomy theatre,

a generall remissnes in the greater p[ar]t of the Surgians of this Companie in their not appearance and personall attendance . . . at the publique Anatomye, and the disorderlynes of those Surgians yt doe appeare for wanting their outward ornament commixing themselves confusedly amongst the Comon people then p[rese]nte, whereby the honor and worthynes of this Companie on the Surgians p[ar]te hath bene much eclipsed.<sup>16</sup>

Though attendance among the company's surgeons may have been declining, "the Comon people" had arrived eagerly to take their places. The court, it appears, took no action to discourage their attendance; instead, its instructions strived to distinguish the surgeons from the crowds of citizens by demanding that all company members wear their robes and sit in assigned seats in order to restore



some dignity to the proceedings. Curious laypeople who could not gain admittance to the Company's anatomies crowded around the hall to peer through the windows; when the neighbors complained, the Barber-Surgeons rented the more land around the building rather than discourage the onlookers.<sup>17</sup> Even more interestingly, the Barber-Surgeons began to insist that those who attended dissections held tickets, though how they obtained these passes for admission – and whether or not money was exchanged in the process – remains unclear.<sup>18</sup> What becomes obvious, however, is that the Barber-Surgeons' anatomies had become the source of fascination for the people of London, so much so that the company's guidelines of decorum failed to contain the public's eagerness to view the proceedings. The Barber-Surgeons instead found themselves running a public show, one whose staging, though less frequent than that of London's playhouse productions, attracted a crowd much like that of its theatrical counterparts and whose enactment developed a strikingly similar sense of drama.

### Textual Authority and Festive Anatomy

Despite the learned atmosphere the Barber-Surgeons' court strove to maintain, anatomical dissections, historically, were hardly grim affairs. Since the earliest days of such demonstrations in Europe, dissections had been public events that served both as academic exercises and as holidays for their viewers. During the medieval period, when public anatomies required a papal indulgence and thus rarely took place, these demonstrations took on an almost festive air, for they devoted themselves to celebrating not only the wonder of the human body but the perfection of established medical knowledge.<sup>19</sup> The most prominent citizens turned out to attend the ceremonies, making these events more social than scientific. The often theatrical festivities surrounding these early anatomies incorporated singing, feasting, and – most intriguingly – the mounting of theatrical productions, resulting in dissections that demonstrated rather than explored the corpse.<sup>20</sup> Andrea Carlino and Luke Wilson, among other scholars, hold that these early anatomical practices treated the cadaver only as a visual aid, for the presiding physicians depended upon ancient authorities, usually Galen's second-century works, to explain the body's inner structure and function.<sup>21</sup>

While today's anatomy classes continue this tradition of relying on books, where the otherwise messy interior of the corpse can be systematically illustrated and explained for the student during the process of dissection, those who observed dissections in the middle ages and Renaissance often had little direct contact with either the authoritative text or the corpse itself. As Wilson shows, early illustrations of anatomical lectures often sever the connection between the corpse and the physician, portraying the physician as staring out from his elevated podium as depicted in Johannes de Ketham's *Fasciculus de Medicina* (1493) (Figure 2). The physician, Wilson argues, could (or at least thought he could) rely on a demonstrator, who was generally a fellow physician, or the dissector, usually a barber-surgeon, to identify the organs within the body, pointing them out for the



Figure 2: The scene of anatomy, as depicted in Johannes de Ketham's *Fasciculus de Medicina*, 1493

benefit of the audience as an ancient anatomical text, read from on high, made reference to them.<sup>22</sup>

Many scholars see these illustrations as reinforcing the social divisions between physicians – portrayed by many scholars as aloof theorists who never looked up from their books – and barber-surgeons, figured as the scorned and illiterate workhorses of early modern medicine who provided more practical, if more obviously gruesome, hands-on treatment to the ill. While physicians and barber-surgeons clearly ministered to the body differently, calling upon different training and educational backgrounds in dispensing their treatments, the distinctness of their interests in the anatomized body has perhaps been overstated. Physicians, whose university training focused on reading ancient, often textually corrupt, medical treatises,<sup>23</sup> specialized in administering drugs rather than hands-on care to restore the body's humoural balance, though in practice their efforts often incorporated more direct, even folk-traditional, means of treatment. Barber-surgeons, on the other hand, learned their trade through apprenticeship and more routinely dealt with their patients' bodies through direct, hands-on care. Their specialties – tooth pulling, bleeding, and wound dressing – exercised far more noticeable effects on the body, either penetrating or sealing its surface to restore its internal operations to their proper balance.<sup>24</sup> Their successes and failures, as a result, were much easier to discern, particularly in the eyes of laypeople. Barber-surgeons were more numerous, and their practices could accommodate emergencies more efficiently. As we shall see in the following chapter, however, the differences in training and methods that separated the barber-surgeons and physicians failed to establish exclusive domains for the two groups in early modern London. Instead, the creation of the Barber-Surgeons' Company and the College of Physicians deepened the rivalry between the two professions, forcing the medical community and the crown to address once again the brands of authority belonging to the physicians' supposedly more theoretical realm and the barber-surgeons' province of hands-on practice. Yet even the physicians, with their emphasis on the more learned theoretical aspects of medicine, were not isolated from the grisliness surrounding dissections. The presence of both physicians and barber-surgeons at the demonstration of the criminal corpse's body led many to see both breeds of practitioners as extensions of the executioner himself, another fearful embodiment of the state's power over the individual.<sup>25</sup>

In the fifteenth century, however, the activities of physicians and barber-surgeons in the anatomy theatre were governed as much by the texts they used during dissections as they were by the state. Early images of anatomical dissection show physicians as more involved with their books than with the corpses at hand, and this preference for scholarly authoritarian words underscores their tangential position in early anatomies. The distance between the corpse and the lecturers contributes to the now-popular view that early modern physicians had little direct contact with the systems they purported to describe, and that, consequently, they rarely had any means of questioning their received medical knowledge. Carlino argues that by the sixteenth century, however, the increasing distance between physicians and their books in images of dissection suggests that anatomists began

to reexamine the relationship between textual authority and experiential knowledge, becoming more involved in the procedures they once merely narrated. These changes occurred gradually rather than in dramatic fashion, at least as title pages of anatomical works represent them; in fact, the era's depictions of dissections portray physicians as showing dramatically different levels of attention to the cadaver.<sup>26</sup> The opening page of a German edition of Mondino dei Liuzzi's *Anatomy* (c. 1493), for example, depicts a physician who is just as interested in the corpse below him as in the text he holds (Figure 3), while his counterpart in a much later Swiss printing of the same text in 1519 stares straight past the body as he lectures from his book.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, as Roger French shows, a reevaluation of visual proof took place in the writings of the Bolognan lecturer Berengario of Carpi, who emphasized *anatomia sensibilis*, a philosophy that concerned itself exclusively with "those structures perceptible in practice to the senses." In his *Commentary on Mondino* (1521), Berengario used questioning techniques borrowed from classical rhetoric to help students reconcile the anatomies they witnessed with previous commentators' accounts of the body's structures and functions. For Berengario, blurring the boundaries between theory and practice thus became the simplest way of accommodating both his profession's written tradition and his individual experience,<sup>28</sup> even with this new approach, though, the title page illustration of his text still shows a lecturer who is distanced from the corpse being explored.<sup>29</sup>

During the same period at Bologna, meanwhile, public dissection's role as entertainment threatened to eclipse scientific inquiry completely. Berengario, for example, claims that he demonstrated the placenta of a hanged woman to "almost five hundred students at the University of Bologna, together with many citizens."<sup>30</sup> As Giovanna Ferrari shows, Bologna's anatomies became entwined with Carnival festivities, so much so that laws were passed in the early seventeenth century "to stamp out forms of behaviour inappropriate to the solemnity of the annual dissection, such as chatting, laughing, asking indecent questions or grabbing hold of the organs prepared by the dissector." Members of the public sometimes even wore carnival masks to the anatomy theatre, and it was not uncommon for them to arrive armed.<sup>31</sup> In the presence of such boisterous onlookers, whose actions foreshadow the confusion that invaded the Barber-Surgeons' Hall with the arrival of London's unacademic public spectators, the formal rhetoric of book-based dissection gave way to a new brand of dramatic ceremonial atmosphere, one whose theatrical nature threatened to eclipse the solemnity of scientific medical demonstration.

## Viewing Vesalius

No figure, however, brings out the controversial relationships between the theatrical performance of dissection and anatomical texts more vividly than Andreas Vesalius, the Belgian medical prodigy who served as professor of anatomy at Padua in the early 1500s. Commonly credited with revolutionizing the

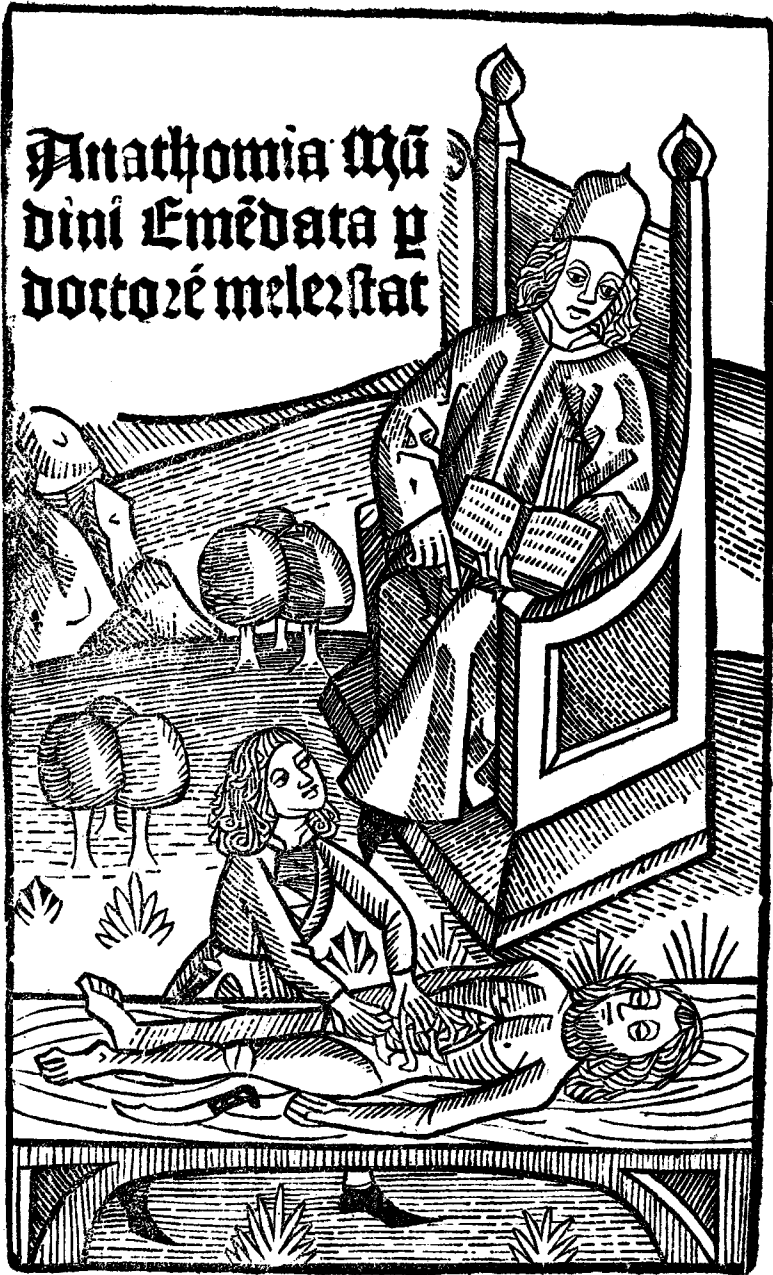


Figure 3: Illustration of a dissection in progress, from a German edition of Mondino dei Liuzzi's *Anatomy*, c. 1493

procedures used for teaching anatomy, Vesalius minimized the importance of ancient texts in his demonstrations and altogether eliminated the barber-surgeon dissector from his performances in the anatomy theatre. Instead, he made incisions into the cadavers himself, spellbinding his large audiences with his seemingly impromptu lectures on the systems he described. He criticized traditional physician lecturers for their efforts to simultaneously dissociate themselves from the body while claiming authority over it, calling them "jackdaws aloft in their high chair, with egregious arrogance croaking things they have never investigated"; his assessment of the more lowly dissectors proved just as uncomplimentary, for he accused them of being "so ignorant of languages that they are unable to explain their dissections to the spectators and muddle what ought to be displayed."<sup>32</sup> For Vesalius, in other words, what anatomy demonstrations had been lacking was a properly authoritative voice, one able to communicate observations and the wisdom of written texts with equal fluency. Lecturers and dissectors may have occupied the same stage, but Vesalius argues that the two actors put on separate, and therefore largely irrelevant, performances devoid of meaning because they exhibited no authentic rhetorical exchange.

Vesalius's decision to perform both roles himself not only effectively eliminated this disjuncture; it also made him a star. His direct manipulation of cadavers, as we shall see, made him the center of attention in the anatomy theatre, and when he, rather than an aloof figure on high, explained the body's structures, Vesalius became the physical vehicle for the voice of authority. All eyes focused upon his theatrical interactions with the corpse, and all ears heard his interpretation of the anatomy. For Jonathan Sawday, such authority owes its emergence to the dynamics of theatrical performance; he envisions Vesalius's demonstrations as undermining the stability of the written word, creating a dramatic contest for authority between the anatomist's speech and the body's structures, which, though clearly visible, remained mysterious and largely unreadable to the lay public.<sup>33</sup> In the anatomy theatre, Sawday argues, "The confrontation between the body and the anatomist came to replace the tripartite division of textual authority, living authority, and the passive authority of the body."<sup>34</sup> Sawday, however, fails to note that this confrontation between the anatomist and the body itself created a new text in its own right, one formed gradually during the demonstration from the constant collision of observations, both aural and visual, gleaned within the anatomy theatre. The dynamic performance, not the written text, came to serve as the third authoritative element in dissection, one that existed alongside – and as the result of – the "living authority" of the anatomist and the "passive authority of the body." Unlike written anatomy texts, which existed before the enactment of the anatomy and (by tradition) remained unchanged by its performance, this new brand of anatomical knowledge could exist only when spoken words and the objects they described were perceived simultaneously by an audience observing firsthand. Although these words and images might be echoed in illustrated books, printed texts could not capture the active interplay between the anatomist's voice and the progressively anatomized corpse. Even the most lavishly illustrated books could only offer static images of the dissection at different stages, requiring readers to

align images and words to recreate their own experiences (or lack thereof) in watching anatomy performed.<sup>35</sup> Anatomical texts, in other words, came to function just like playtexts; they could provide a narrative of theatrical performance and even give an account of the dialogue between the lecturer and the cadaver that ensued there, yet they could not capture the nuances of the sights and actions that viewers would have seen in conjunction with the words spoken from the stage.

These limitations to the printed text's authority apply not just to the written words describing the processes of dissection but to the images meant to illustrate the body's structures and functions. Recent scholarly interpretations of the title page to Vesalius's masterful guide to anatomy, *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), reveal the difficulties inherent in attempting to encapsulate images of these performances on the printed page. The woodcut, reproduced and discussed in almost every recent treatment of anatomy's history, depicts Vesalius at work, dissecting the corpse of a woman in front of a large, riotous crowd (Figure 4).<sup>36</sup> Though most scholars carefully point out that the anatomical theatre pictured probably never existed – that the image was most likely copied from a playtext's frontispiece<sup>37</sup> – the image remains useful for examining what Sawday calls the "intellectual texture" of anatomical performance. For him, Vesalius's title page provides us with a starting point from which "we can begin to comprehend something of the contradictory emotions of desire and horror which anatomization seems to have engendered within early-modern culture."<sup>38</sup> Just as importantly, it hints at the way that Vesalius himself viewed his own anatomical performances. Whether or not such a structure ever existed in Padua, the anatomist claimed that he performed his dissections in a similar theatre that seated five hundred spectators. The illustration has in turn led to a number of critical attempts at reanimating the performance whose action is frozen within its lines. Not surprisingly, such readings often interpret the woodcut itself differently, describing in conflicting terms its images and the actions they suggest. Luke Wilson, for example, concludes that the picture illustrates the circulation of authority within the theatre, where the gap between Vesalius's words and the corpse's silent visual explanations is bridged by Vesalius's direct contact with the corpse. In Wilson's terms, Vesalius and the cadaver perform one another, since the lecturer's words and hands refer to the body's structures, which in turn illustrate the spoken explanations; such dynamics extend to the spectators in the theatre, transforming them into the objects of study, for each fleshy body's "loss of distinction" in the crowd leaves it oscillating "between subjection to an anatomizing gaze in relation to which it is a patient and [an] assumption of an authority of which it is the agent – each, in a causal mutuality, continually exchanging itself for the other." For Wilson, however, the skeleton suspended over the dissecting table threatens to hinder the circulation of authority between anatomist and cadaver, for its lack of bodily interior denies the spectator any glimpse of the body's inner flesh. As such, the skeleton serves for Wilson as a reminder of anatomy demonstrations' traditional reliance upon lecturers on high, recreating and mocking the "cadaver, surgeon, and professor or text" model – a model that Sawday renames (and reverses in chiasmic fashion) as "textual authority, living authority, and the passive



Figure 4: The title page to Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*, 1543



authority of the body."<sup>39</sup> Yet, Wilson holds, Vesalius's figure remains aloof from this exchange of gazes; instead, he somewhat mysteriously claims that Vesalius looks derisively at the two men fighting under the table in the foreground (though the table's corner would no doubt interfere with his line of vision), thereby further isolating outside observers from sharing in the circulation of authority between anatomist and cadaver.<sup>40</sup>

If the scene's visual circuits are interrupted, Sawday is not bothered by it, for he argues that the bisected concentric circles that make up the illustration allow us to glimpse a "cross-section" of the dissection scene, letting us study it as a scientific specimen of anatomical procedures.<sup>41</sup> While Wilson sees Vesalius's gaze as directed at a distraction inside the theatre that in turn distracts the woodcut's viewers from the scene of dissection, Sawday sees it as aimed directly at the page's viewers, "inviting us to step inside the theatre, to join the crowd who have gathered to watch this dynamic confrontation between living and dead authority."<sup>42</sup> The anatomist, however, makes no such contact with the viewers' gaze; instead, Vesalius's eyes appear to stare off blankly, almost distractedly, at something outside the scope of the woodcut, something which the illustration's beholders cannot possibly see.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the image as Sawday sees it zeroes in on the corpse's uterus to offer the woodcut's audience answers about the cosmos rather than frustrate their attempts to examine nature's mysteries. "What is depicted," Sawday grandly claims, "is no less than a demonstration of the structural coherence of the universe itself, whose central component – the principle of life concealed within the womb – Vesalius is about to open to our gaze."<sup>44</sup> The picture, he argues, serves as the perfect counter to Copernicus's then-radical theory of the heliocentric universe, published the same year in *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*. Rather than allow the sun to become the central point of all life, Sawday argues, the Vesalius title page proclaims the human body as the nexus from which not only the human race but the universe itself emerges.

Remarkably, the womb which Sawday sees as the focal point of the illustration may or may not actually be visible within the woodcut itself. The woodcut's shading, after all, seems to reveal a vague darkness within the abdomen rather than any structures that may lie beneath the subject's skin. The fact remains, however, that Sawday and a host of other critics never question that the womb proves the subject of the illustration's scrutiny.<sup>45</sup> Writing about anatomy's influence in *Othello*, for example, Howard Marchitello also relies on the womb's supposed visibility in the woodcut to argue that Vesalius held anatomy capable of explaining both the scientific and individualized personal narratives of dissected bodies. Marchitello's argument reveals how the uterus, though obscured if visible at all in the illustration, has become so central to the woodcut's interpretation: he and his fellow critics have read – and believed – Vesalius's written text. The woodcut, Marchitello argues, renders the woman's body "emphatically and publicly open," and this openness is suggested in the anatomist's written description of what is occurring within the dissection scene. Marchitello quotes from Charles O'Malley's translation of Vesalius's account of the action as follows: