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Review of Flaying in the Pre-Modern World, ed. by Larissa Tracy (Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 2017) vii + 406 pp. ISBN 9781843844525

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Reviews

Flaying in the Pre-Modern World, ed. by Larissa Tracy (Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 2017) vii + 406 pp. ISBN 9781843844525

Flaying in the Pre-Modern World contributes to a burgeoning conversation in historical research: skin studies. Building on previous works in this field such as those undertaken by Stephen Connor, Katie L Walter and Sarah Kay, this edited collection stands out from previous studies by examining literal acts of flaying through the laws and tools relating to the body to create a 'more textured understanding' of the skin and its history (p. 4). In the introduction, editor Larissa Tracy posits that 'removing skin tears away identity and leaves a blank slate upon which law, punishment, sanctity or monstrosity can be inscribed' (p. 1). The fourteen chapters within this collection each focus upon one of these categories. The collection aims to remedy the anachronism of medieval flaying portrayed in popular culture. In practice, flaying was rarely sanctioned as punishment. Rather, this collection aims and succeeds in challenging perceptions of flaying by examining the removal of skin in various contexts: medical intervention, scalping, hunting and religious flagellation.

Jack Hartnell's opening chapter analyses the tools of flaying through surgical manuals like those of Guy de Chauliac, Jan Yperman, John Arderne and Jean Gispaden and their accompanying images of tools and anatomy. Hartnell also assesses the material culture of amputation saws and knives from the Wellcome Collection and the London Science Museum. Hartnell argues that the knife was the natural extension of the hand for the medieval surgeon. The puncturing of the skin was used to facilitate healing and recovery. The merging of the hand and the handle borders on the liquid and they become interchangeable. The violent and healing act of penetrating the skin was considered a fluid interplay for the surgeon.

William Sayers' chapter brings a slightly different perspective to the collection by focusing on early medieval Irish law and legal literature. Skin was not a distinct entity but a 'form-giving covering' (p. 284). Sayers closely examines the Irish language, analysing the connection between *croicenn* [skin] and *creicc* [selling, buying] and how this combination renders Christ's flayed skin as both religious artefact and commodity. Sayer concludes that for the Irish, the total removal of the skin was a foreign concept and was brought over by Christian hagiographical literature.

Susan Small's chapter explores sixteenth-century Germany's trial and punishment of werewolf Peter Stubbe. This is an interesting investigation of execution tools like axes, swords and tongs. Small argues that the tools used during Stubbe's punishment 'invoke specific aspects of the crimes they punish, thereby mapping the misdeeds onto the body of the criminal'

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(p. 73). Building on Esther Cohen's study of pain *The Modulated Scream* (2010), Small advances Cohen's analysis by focusing on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Germany using broadsheets and woodcuts as evidence.

Some chapters of the collection focus on skin as a site where punishment can be exacted. Kelly DeVries explores the flaying of Marcantonio Bragadin, a Venetian who died fighting the Ottoman Turks in 1571-2. DeVries argues that flaying as a punishment was not frequent but that many literary texts used the act of flaying as a 'means of Othering' (p. 52). Similarly, Emily Leverett's chapter argues that because flaying was such a gross erasure of identity, it emphasises the 'deeply culturally damaging acts for which it was used as punishment' (p. 285). Through an exploration of the mid-fifteenth-century romances *Siege of Jerusalem* and *Richard Coeur De Lyon*, Leverett concludes that flaying and cannibalism are used to enforce boundaries of Christian and Muslim identity. The crusading Christian heroes destroy the skin of their enemies to maintain the distinction.

In a chapter focusing on the flaying of beards in Arthurian literature, Michael Livingston argues that this was a gendered sign of political authority. By removing the beard, the man's masculinity was also eliminated and was a mark of humiliation. Beard-flaying was a further step than beard shaving and made the 'literal a metaphoric removal of an individual from a position of power in the body politic' (p. 314).

Mary Rambaran-Olm's chapter focuses on the myth of flayed Dane skin displayed on the door of an Essex cathedral after the St Brice's Day massacre ordered by King Æthelred in 1002 CE. This myth perpetuated 'an early modern perception of medieval brutality and acts as nothing more than sensational modern nationalist propaganda' (p. 92). Rambaran-Olm dismisses the myth through an assortment of legal codes, hagiographical works and biological analyses which have proven the flayed remains to be bovine. Flayed skin here is the persistent reimagining of the Anglo-Saxon period to 'contribute to the origin myth of the English' (p. 115).

Skin as a site where monstrosity and otherness can be inscribed is one of the primary categories of the collection. Larrisa Tracy, Renée Ward and Frederika Bain examine the wearing of animal hide and changing identities in different contexts. Tracy analyses the connections between flaying and identity in Scandinavian sagas. Grounding the act of flaying as a prominent literary and artistic motif across medieval Europe, Tracy argues that flaying was also used to suggest markers of supernatural difference. Building on the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and his Monster Theory (1996), Tracy suggests that flaying enabled characters to have a new identity. Ögmundr in Örvar-Odds saga (Arrow-Odd's Saga) is a hybrid of human and ogre who is marked as monstrous both before and after he has been flayed. His cloak is formed from the flayed beards of kings, a feature which draws from Livingston's chapter. Tracy concludes that 'flayers and flayed often exchange identities via the removal of skin', reiterating the hybridity of flaying as both restoration and punishment, human and supernatural (p. 347).

In chapter fourteen, Renée Ward examines the ballad of Robin Hood from a seventeenth-century manuscript held by the British Library. Ward posits that Robin's violence against Guy of Gisborne's body resides in the cultural meaning of animal skin and hunting. 'The hide carries a series of identities' and its removal transgresses both cultural and bodily boundaries (p. 350). Robin Hood both literally and figuratively flays Guy of Gisborne, dissociating the body from its recognisable features and humanity. For Ward, skin is used as a signifier of

the contradictory medieval social system and Robin violates the perceived boundaries to both resist and reinforce the feudal structure.

Frederika Bain's chapter provides an especially intriguing analysis of the liminal power of wearing skins and hides. Examining myths from Hercules to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Bain argues that wearing the skin of animals is a 'barrier-breach' (p. 121) and creates a hybrid being. In all tales of skin-wearing, it provokes 'transformation [and] the breaking of barriers between states.' (p. 136). Building on Sarah Kay's extensive bibliography, Bain contextualises her argument with an examination of medieval hunting, poaching, and parchment-making practices. This also becomes a useful foundation for later chapters. Bain's assessment of liminal personhood through wearing animal skins is a nuanced and interesting conclusion to the first section of the volume.

Many of the chapters in this collection highlight the skin as both a site and source of sanctity. Asa Simon Mittman and Christine Sciacca assess the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew. A common motif in many medieval works, the saint was often depicted as a flayed figure also wearing his skin. Their most compelling argument is that the arrangement of Bartholomew's body 'recalls scenes of animals flayed as part of the medieval hunt' where the animal is tracked, killed, and skinned (p. 152). The typological connection between animal sacrifice and martyr sacrifice is highlighted by Bartholomew wearing his own flayed skin as a garment. By building on Sarah Kay's work on the materiality of skin, Mittman and Sciacca establish a balanced assessment of the illustrations found in the hagiographies of Saint Bartholomew.

Sherry C.M. Linquist's chapter surveys the fifteenth-century illustrations of the *Belle Heures*, a Book of Hours commissioned by Duke Jean Duc de Berry from Herman, Jean and Pol Limbourg. Linquist argues that the 'representations of flagellation and flaying are a powerful inter-visual motif […] of constructing powerful models of masculinist devotion and artistic identity' (p. 175). Linquist highlights the erotic charge of the scenes the Limbourg brothers created for their patron, suggesting Berry's inappropriate sexual sins. The book acts as a redemption narrative for this sexual transgression, the skin flogged as penance. The penetration of bodies evokes both pleasure and the rupture of flesh required for salvation. Saint Bartholomew is pictured, his lacerated skin representing the body to "titillate, accuse, reassure and redeem' Berry's sins (p. 187).

Peter Dent's chapter analyses Christ's flagellated skin, noting that images of medieval visual culture emphasised Christ's flaying as a 'process of devotional adoration' (p. 208). Building on Elaine Scarry's interpretative frame of pain from her monograph *The Body in Pain* (1985), Dent argues that Christ's wound is the 'most significant contribution to the communicative potential of Christ's flagellated body' (p. 214). Dent's most intriguing argument centres on Christ's skin not just as flogged but flayed, as a metaphor for a garment and its associations with parchment. Dent's association of parchment and Christ's skin as modes of communication is convincing because parchment was predominantly made from sheep skin.

Valerie Gramling's chapter examines the permeable border of the skin as representing the delineation between humanity and divinity for both Mary and Jesus in the four English Cycle Passion Plays. By turning his skin into parchment, Gramling asserts that Christ's body becomes a text of deeper significance. Mary laments that Jesus's body is:

> Thow he had nevyr of me be born,
> and I sey his flesch thus al totorn –

> on bak, behyndyn, on brest beforn,
> Rent with woundys wyde.
> Nedys I must wonyn in woo
> to see my frende with many a fo, all to rent from top to too,
> his flesche withowtyn hyde.

The juxtaposition of Mary's bodily integrity and the dissolution of Christ's body 'creates a dichotomy between not only integrity and disintegration but also between the eternal and the mortal, the soul and the body' (p. 241). Gramling's chapter is an interesting exploration of flayed skin as symbol of divine resurrection.

The collection concludes with an epilogue discussing early modern anthropodermic bibliopegy, the process of binding books with human skin, by Perry Neil Harrison. Harrison argues that the fluid meaning of skin is exemplified by this process because it can be used to construct different identities and dehumanise. Books bound in human skin are 'a stark reminder of the mutable nature of human form' (p. 367). As the collection has shown, the skin has potential in both its being and meaning. Versatile, fluid and meaningful, the skin has the power to represent and change identity. As highlighted throughout the book, despite its rarity in true history, flaying was multivalent and didn't have one, single meaning. Rather, skin, especially when separated from the human frame, represents both the body's fragility and its capacity to endure.

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