

‘Painful Knowledge: Suffering and the Parts of Man in Some Examples from Latin Poetry’

In this paper, I want to concentrate on one aspect of medical activity as reflected in Latin poetic texts: anatomy as an act of violence. By anatomy, I do not mean only or even primarily a scientific area of inquiry and an intellectual way of thinking about the human body as scientifically ‘mapped’ into *loci*. Instead, I mean more generally anatomy as a perception of the body in its subdivisions (externally observed and objectified, or subjectively perceived, or both) as parts (viscera, limbs, organs...). This ‘chopping up’ is an expressionist expedient particularly evident in the Latin poetry of the early centuries of our era, one whose gory, horrifying aspects have been explored by many scholars as a literal theme as well as a metaphor for poetic creation. The ways in which Latin poetry revels in corporeality have been interpreted as realistic, grotesque, comedic, and satirical, and also as conveying a sense of gory tragic grandeur. One aspect that has not been emphasised, and that exploits medical discourses and practices, is the fragmentation of the body, its reduction to parts and its celebration — if in a negative, paroxysmic manner — as an assemblage of parts which, once ‘extracted’, inhabit an uneasy grey area between life and death.

Through analysis of a number of texts (from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to Seneca’s *Thyestes*), I will seek to illustrate how a reduction to pieces, the specific kind of *sparagmos* cherished by some Latin poets, intersects with medical themes. Deep interconnections of pain, spectacle, inspection, and knowledge of the human body are thus exposed, leaving at the centre an image of the human body as easily cut up into parts but impossible to recompose.