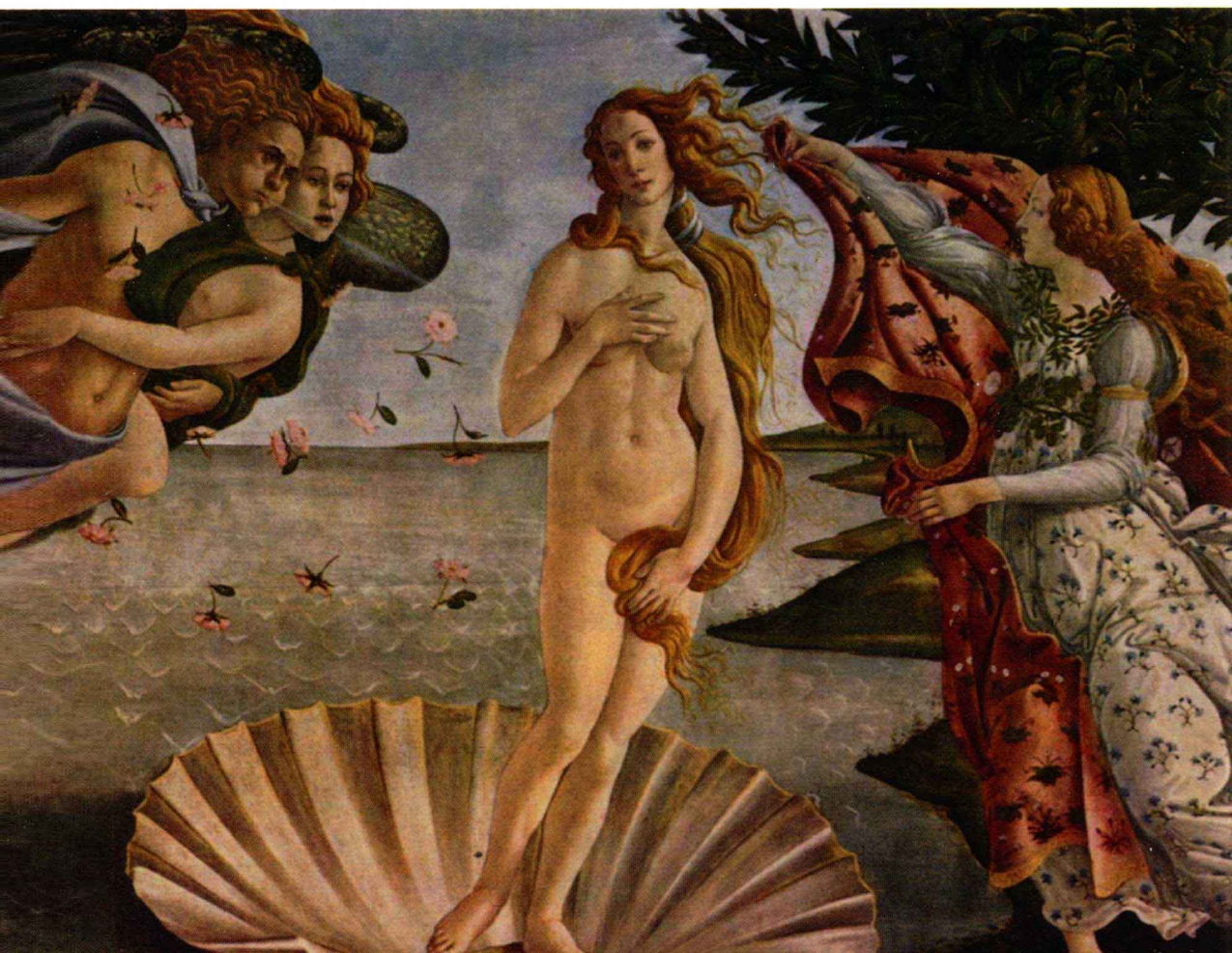


A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE HUMAN BODY
IN THE RENAISSANCE

EDITED BY LINDA KALOF AND WILLIAM BYNUM



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SERIES PREFACE

A Cultural History of the Human Body is a six-volume series reviewing the changing cultural construction of the human body throughout history. Each volume follows the same basic structure and begins with an outline account of the human body in the period under consideration. Next, specialists examine major aspects of the human body under seven key headings: birth/death, health/disease, sex, medical knowledge/technology, popular beliefs, beauty/concepts of the ideal, marked bodies of gender/race/class, marked bodies of the bestial/divine, cultural representations and self and society. Thus, readers can choose a synchronic or a diachronic approach to the material—a single volume can be read to obtain a thorough knowledge of the body in a given period, or one of the seven themes can be followed through time by reading the relevant chapters of all six volumes, thus providing a thematic understanding of changes and developments over the long term. The six volumes divide the history of the body as follows:

Volume 1: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity* (750 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.)

Volume 2: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age* (500–1500)

Volume 3: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Renaissance* (1400–1650)

Volume 4: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Enlightenment* (1650–1800)

Volume 5: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire* (1800–1920)

Volume 6: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age* (1920–21st Century)

General Editors, Linda Kalof and William Bynum

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vii
SERIES PREFACE	xiii
Introduction <i>William Bynum</i>	1
1 Birth and Death in Early Modern Europe <i>Lianne McTavish</i>	15
2 Why Me? Why Now? How? The Body in Health and Disease <i>Margaret Healy</i>	37
3 Sexuality: Of Man, Woman, and Beastly Business <i>Katherine Crawford</i>	55
4 The Body in/as Text: Medical Knowledge and Technologies in the Renaissance <i>Susan Broomhall</i>	73
5 The Common Body: Renaissance Popular Beliefs <i>Karen Raber</i>	99
6 Beauty and Concepts of the Ideal <i>Mary Rogers</i>	125
7 The Marked Body as Otherness in Renaissance Italian Culture <i>Patrizia Bettella</i>	149

Figure 3.3: Hirsute man appears to St. Anthony.	65
Figure 3.4: Uterus resembling a penis.	66
Figure 3.5: Title page of Helkiah Crooke, <i>Somatographia anthropine. Or a description of the body of man</i> (London: W. Jaggard, 1616).	68

CHAPTER 4

Figure 4.1: St. Roch with his dog, indicating a plague bubo on his groin.	79
Figure 4.2: A hospital ward in the Hotel Dieu de Paris.	80
Figure 4.3: Copy of fresco in the Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Rome, <i>The Count of Chinchon Receives Cinchona</i> .	81
Figure 4.4: Detail of a woodcut depicting ancient herbalists and scholars of medicinal lore.	83
Figure 4.5: Four grotesquely deformed children.	86
Figure 4.6: Quack displaying his wares to a crowd.	87
Figure 4.7: Frontispiece illustration showing birth scene.	89
Figure 4.8: Andreas Vesalius by Jan Stephan van Calcar.	91
Figure 4.9: Indigenous people gathering cinnamon bark.	94
Figure 4.10: <i>The Diseases and Casualties this Week</i> , London 39, from 12th to 19th September, 1665.	95
Figure 4.11: Monstrous creature born to honorable parents, 1560.	96

CHAPTER 5

Figure 5.1: <i>The Village Doctress Distilling Eyewater</i> , Thomas Rowlandson, ca. 1800.	101
Figure 5.2: <i>Charlatans at Work</i> , from William Clowes, <i>A Briefe and Necessary Treatise touching the disease called Morbus Gallicus</i> , 1585.	102
Figure 5.3: Figure representing one of the four temperaments or humors ("Complessioni"), in this case the choleric, associated with fire.	105
Figure 5.4: Figure representing one of the four temperaments or humors ("Complessioni"), a seated man with tortoise, representing the phlegmatic humor.	106

Figure 5.5: King Charles II touching for the King's Evil.	111
Figure 5.6: Title page of Robert Turner's <i>Botonologica</i> (1664).	118
Figure 5.7: Man wearing a tourniquet letting blood into a bowl.	122

CHAPTER 6

Figure 6.1: Domenico da Bartolo, <i>Infants</i> , Reverse of a <i>Desco da Parto</i> , 1430s.	126
Figure 6.2: Proportions of a female figure.	130
Figure 6.3: Sandro Botticelli, <i>The Birth of Venus</i> , ca. 1480.	134
Figure 6.4: Raffaello Sanzio (Raphael), <i>Parnassus</i> , ca. 1510, Vatican Palace, Stanza della Senatura.	134
Figure 6.5: Rogier van der Weyden, <i>Calvary/Crucifixion</i> , ca. 1450–55.	136
Figure 6.6: Jan van Eyck, <i>Virgin Enthroned</i> , from <i>The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (The Ghent Altarpiece)</i> , Cathedral of St. Bavo, Ghent, Belgium.	137
Figure 6.7: Michelangelo, <i>Moses</i> , from the Tomb of Julius II, ca. 1515, Rome, S. Pietro in Vincoli.	138
Figure 6.8: Agnolo Bronzino, <i>Portrait of Young Man</i> .	142
Figure 6.9: Anon, Hellenistic, <i>Ariadne</i> , Vatican, Vatican Museums.	146

CHAPTER 7

Figure 7.1: Facchino/Porter. Day Laborer.	153
Figure 7.2: Peasant/Contadina. Contadina trivisana. Female peasant from Treviso.	155
Figure 7.3: Old Woman. Head and shoulders of a hideous old woman wearing an escoffin over a wimple.	157
Figure 7.4: Cretin with goiter, Or Capitan Nasotra.	159
Figure 7.5: Man/Donkey.	162
Figure 7.6: Moro de Barbaria. Moor of Barbary.	164
Figure 7.7: Black Slaves. A male and female slave playing instruments.	166
Figure 7.8: Man from the Canary Islands.	168

Figure 7.9: Black Servant. <i>Judith putting the head of Holofernes in a bag helped by her servant</i> , by Johann Nepomuk Strixner.	170
Figure 7.10: Cannibalism, Native Americans.	174
Figure 7.11: Turbaned Turk.	177

CHAPTER 8

Figure 8.1: <i>Sir Launcelot and the witch Hallewes</i> , Aubrey Beardsley illustration.	189
Figure 8.2: <i>Hansel and Gretel</i> , illustrated by Arthur Rackham, 1920.	195
Figure 8.3: Execution of an arsonist witch by burning at stake.	196
Figure 8.4: <i>Four Witches</i> , Albrecht Dürer, 1497.	197
Figure 8.5: <i>Witches Riding</i> , Francisco de Goya, ca. 1798.	200
Figure 8.6: <i>The Witch</i> , Albrecht Dürer, ca. 1500.	201
Figure 8.7: Reliquary for the arm of St. Luke with the coat-of-arms of Sancia of Mallorca, ca. 1337–1338.	203

CHAPTER 9

Figure 9.1: <i>The Proportions of the Human Figure</i> (Vitruvian Man), Leonardo da Vinci, 1490.	212
Figure 9.2: <i>America</i> , an engraving from <i>Nova Repenta</i> , by Theodor Galle, ca. 1580.	217
Figure 9.3: Elizabeth I, <i>The Armada Portrait</i> , by George Gower ca. 1588.	221
Figure 9.4: Albrecht Dürer, image of a syphilitic accompanying a broadside of Theodoricus Ulsenius, 1496.	223
Figure 9.5: Warning against syphilis.	224

CHAPTER 10

Figure 10.1: Domenico Ghirlandaio, <i>Old Man with Young Boy</i> .	233
Figure 10.2: Three children of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, 1748.	234

Figure 10.3: Leonardo da Vinci, <i>Self-portrait as an Old Man</i> , ca. 1510–1513.	235
Figure 10.4: Jews.	237
Figure 10.5: Prostitute, 1524.	238
Figure 10.6: Childbirth, Midwives, ca. 1583.	243
Figure 10.7: Birth of St. Edmund, Wet Nursed, 1433.	245
Figure 10.8: Donatello, <i>Mary Magdalene</i> , Maddalena, sculpture by Donatello in Opera del Duomo Museum Museo in Florence, Italy, ca. 1453–1455.	246
Figure 10.9: Donatello, statue of condottiere Gattamelata, 1453.	249

Introduction

WILLIAM BYNUM

Historical periodizations have real significance, even if they are sometimes fuzzy around the edges. The words used to describe them can vary according to the academic discipline that is being practiced. The “Renaissance” in the title of this volume spans roughly two and a half centuries, from 1400 to 1650. Thus, it deals with the period traditionally known as the Renaissance, but also with what is generally called the “Early Modern Period.” It roughly coincides with the epoch historians of science would dub the scientific revolution. It includes what historians of religion call the Reformation and what historians of geography would think of as the Age of Exploration. In addition, some of the chapters in this volume reach back, or look forward, to tie up topics the contributors seek to develop.

These temporal shifts are almost inevitable, as time is seamless and historical periodizations are generally post hoc constructions. People have always been aware that they are living in a particular time, but no “pre-Socratic” philosopher knew Socrates was just around the corner. “Enlightenment” was a term that was contemporary with the ideals that shaped it, but the Enlightenment occurred at different times in different places, and with varying meanings. The Bulgarian Enlightenment, for instance, happened a century after it was experienced in Western Europe. All historical labels are culture bound: English-speaking scholars know what is meant by “Victorian,” but to use that word to describe nineteenth-century values in Russia or Italy strains meaning. In any case, the world is much larger than we often imagine, and even the ubiquitous word “Renaissance” is geographically bound, and has meaning to a Japanese or Tibetan scholar only if he or she is thinking about Europe. There

was an Enlightenment in North America, and there were even Victorian values in that region of the world, but there was no Renaissance. The ordinary historical terms we routinely use still leave most of the world untouched.

The chapters in this volume thus deal with themes circumscribed both chronologically and geographically: they center on Europeans and the perceptions of Europeans. They have been written by scholars from a variety of disciplines and specializations, which is entirely appropriate for a volume of cultural history. They all naturally touch on “bodies” (all history that deals with people does, willy-nilly: our bodies are all we have, in the end); but they also all reflect in varying degrees five important developments that mark out the Renaissance as a particular epoch in Western history. At the risk of stating the obvious, we shall deal with these general themes, before teasing out some of the important insights of each individual chapter. These generalities may be grouped as follows: print culture, religious turmoil, the expanding world, the classical inheritance, and the beginnings of modern science and medicine.

The first general innovation that characterizes the Renaissance was the rise of print culture. Long ago, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) identified the printing press (along with the compass and gunpowder) as one of the technological developments that had made his own world what it was. The history of the book is now an academic subject in its own right, but the impact of printing is a subject no historian of the Renaissance and early modern period can neglect, regardless of her or his primary focus. Print culture made literacy more vital, and it helped create the common scholarly culture that can be discerned to emerge during our period. It changed the nature of academic debate and disputation, and although it was of course one of those top-down developments, print came to change the lives of ordinary people as well.

The classic modern study of the role of the printing press in social change is that of Elizabeth Eisenstein: her monumental volumes, published in 1979 and partially inspired by the media studies of Marshall McLuhan, examined print as an instrument of social change. Her arguments about the communication of knowledge, the growth of literacy, and the commerce of books reminded historians how fundamental the printing press was in the formation of European culture. More recently, the equally important work of Adrian Johns has challenged Eisenstein’s basic framework. Johns argues that print culture was not simply a given after Gutenberg’s innovation of the 1430s. Rather, everything that had to do with printing, publishing, selling, and trusting books had to be *made*, in a much more gradual and piecemeal manner than Eisenstein’s model presupposed. Johns offers rich case studies of the care scholars took to ensure that their books contained what they really wanted to say. Often, they would travel long distances, and stay for months, to supervise the printing and production of their treasured works. He also points out that the absence of copyright meant readers had to beware that what they purchased was what the

stated author had actually written. Print culture did not simply spring onto the world in 1439; it was gradually made over a century or more.¹

As both Eisenstein and Johns recognized, print culture was not simply about books; it also took in posters, pamphlets, tracts, and many other forms of communication. It allowed authors to write about bodies, and it also allowed them to illustrate them. Woodcuts and engraving techniques were used in Europe even before Gutenberg's moveable type introduced printing, and it was an obvious step to combine the two. Anatomy books routinely did just this. Vesalius's great work of 1543 used illustrations to great effect, and it is probably the first book in which the illustrations are actually more important than the text. The history of Renaissance anatomy is inseparable from the history of Renaissance publishing, as anatomists sought to present their discoveries in ever more striking ways. Monographs by Sawday, Roberts, and others explore this strand to science, medicine, and publishing during the period.²

Renaissance artists also contributed to the field, and although artistic anatomy concentrated on the musculoskeletal system and what was later called the anatomy of expression, Renaissance depictions of the human body, male and female, meant that artists kept abreast of, and sometimes contributed to, discoveries in anatomy. Leonardo da Vinci is probably the best-known example of this fusion of art and science, although his immediate impact in the area was limited, because much of his private work remained unknown until much later. Had he used the printing press to disseminate the insights he recorded in his notebooks, both the history of art and the history of anatomy, science, and technology might have been different.

The novelty of print culture thus runs through the period and permeates the chapters in this volume. So does a second theme, the importance of religion, and especially, the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation, more powerful in northern Europe than in the Mediterranean lands, catalyzed the cultural fragmentation of Europe. The nature of specific religious confessions began to influence what was acceptable, and what was not, and in a roundabout way to reinforce the nationalism that was beginning to emerge in the period.

Protestantism put a premium on literacy, because it emphasized each person's relationship with God.³ Being able to read the Bible was seen as a duty for all good Christians. This in turn created a market for religious books, which was also reflected in more general printing and publishing. At the same time, the polarization of the various confessions created tensions that often resulted in persecutions and wars. Most of the European wars of the period were ostensibly fought in the name of religion: we might wish to analyze them in political terms, but the rhetoric of the time suggests that religion was frequently the language in which politics expressed itself. Henry VIII of England may have used religious observance as the excuse to do what he wished to do, but both Henry and his chief advisers were acutely aware of the power religion played

in both international and national affairs. The Reformation may have started as an internal issue within the Catholic Church, but it soon became much more. Whatever the confession, however, Europe remained overwhelmingly Christian during this period, and religion profoundly influenced the way most people perceived the world.

Religion also influenced what people could and could not say or publish. The Counter-Reformation had its own power, and the Catholic Church reacted to the threats to its autonomy in ways that were often firm, even brutal, but hardly surprising. The Index—the list of books Catholics were forbidden to read—was first created in 1529, and a number of books, some even by devout Catholics, appeared on the Index. Most famously, Galileo's *Three Discourses*, which presented the balance of probability in favor of the Copernican worldview, earned its author the condemnation of the Church authorities, and Galileo spent his last years under house arrest.⁴ Others were not so lucky, and heretics were routinely burned at the stake or otherwise disposed of. Giordano Bruno was burned in 1600 for his philosophical and astronomical heresies.⁵ The Roman Catholic Church had no monopoly on such acts of brutality, of course: Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva by John Calvin for his doubts about the Trinity, and Henry VIII dispatched more than one of his enemies, including Sir Thomas More, one of the most gifted men in England.

The religion of the period was thus often extreme and violent. At a crude level, one could argue that souls were placed at a much higher premium than bodies: if your soul was tainted, I could do what I liked with your body. Bodies mattered too, and one of the major divergences between Catholicism and Protestantism concerned the most sacred body of all: that of Jesus. At the Council of Trent, first convened in 1545 and lasting almost two decades, the Roman Catholic Church set out its stall in the face of the rising tide of Protestantism. One key affirmation was that, during the Eucharist, the host literally becomes the body of Christ. Protestants interpreted the ritual symbolically, a stance that was easier to square with the scientific innovations of the period.

A third persistent influence on mentality during the Renaissance was the expanding geographical world. The discovery of the New World in the late fifteenth century was the most striking example, but Europeans also became much more familiar with parts of Africa and the Far East. The exploitation of these newfound lands began almost immediately; colonization was more selective but is of course a feature of the early European presence in both North and South America. The disease toll of sub-Saharan Africa was a formidable obstacle to early European penetration, but trading posts in the Malay Archipelago and other areas in the Far East were established, and India, like China, fascinated Europeans. India felt the thrust of European ambitions earlier than China, but both countries presented the remarkable reality of ancient, literate cultures. They were of course not newly known to Europeans, but they became

part of the heady mix of the expanding world that so dominates some of the art and literature of the period.⁶

The impact of all this on the consciousness of Europeans was aided by print and illustration, and the confrontation with new physiognomies and exotic cultural practices was influential for thoughtful Europeans. Michel Montaigne, whose reflections on his world are invoked in several chapters in this volume, is a particularly striking instance of someone whose perceptions of the world were challenged by his realization that there was a world elsewhere. John Donne's poems also articulated the liberating, as well as disturbing, implications of a world (and universe) expanded by the compass, sail, and telescope. The world, it now seemed, was filled with a vast variety of bodies of differing shapes, sizes, and colors. Equally significantly, Europeans discovered that customs, conventions, morals, and beliefs also came in many shades. The anthropology of the period, based on travelers' tales and reports from sea captains, explorers, and merchants, contained a mix of wonder, awe, revulsion, and fantasy; but it widened perceptions of what bodies might be and do.⁷

Exploration forced Europeans of the period to look outward; but for all that was new, people in the Renaissance were also uncovering and revering the old. The classical tradition inevitably looms large in any work on the Renaissance, but much that was new in art, architecture, design, philosophy, and literature was inspired by ancient practitioners of these and other domains. If Aristotle had been the overarching presence in the Middle Ages, he was at least partially dethroned by his own teacher, Plato, during the Renaissance. Neoplatonism became one of the most powerful intellectual forces during the early Renaissance, pervasive from the Italy of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) to the England of Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688). A range of themes, such as the Great Chain of Being, the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm, and the reality of astral forces, were elaborated within the context of ancient wisdom, of which Plato was only one authority. The Hermetic tradition, first explored in detail by Francis Yates, provided an undercurrent throughout the period in philosophy, science, and even religion.⁸

More soberly, perhaps, the steady discovery and editing of yet more ancient texts provided meat and drink for scholars and was a major force in the humanistic movement. People in the Renaissance realized how rich was the classical tradition, and our own appreciation of it rests on foundations established in the period. Many of the chapters in this volume quite appropriately look backward, as major figures sought to express their own modernity in ways that were deeply and explicitly colored by their readings of their favorite classical authors.

At the same time, the centuries covered in this volume also coincide with what historians of science and medicine call the "scientific revolution," and the achievements of the period in fields as diverse as anatomy and astronomy,

challenged people's attitudes both to the classical past, and to the world they found around themselves. What came to be called "the Battle of the Books"—about whether the ancients or the moderns know more—was a debate about science and medicine, not other areas of human endeavor. By the early seventeenth century, it had been answered pretty conclusively in favor of the moderns, even if there were still a few individuals around who still believed Galen knew best about medicine, or Aristotle and Ptolemy about physics and astronomy. The tide was rapidly turning, however, and the progressive nature of scientific knowledge was being accepted as a comfortable fact of modernity.⁹

The science most relevant to perceptions of the body was medicine. Its practice was and largely still is as much a matter of art as of science, even if we hope that art is infused with scientific insights. There are some paradoxes within medicine, however. First, although Galen was still a force within academic medicine, even in 1650, toward the end of the period covered in this volume, Hippocrates (who now merely stands for a group of writers) began to be the most revered medical authority of antiquity. Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689) is not known as the "English Hippocrates" for nothing. The humors, elaborated by the Hippocratics but put into their transmitted form by Galen, continued to dominate explanations of health and disease at the bedside. But Galen began to be seen increasingly as representing the dogmatic within medicine and Hippocratics as the open, empirical element within the science and practice of medicine. The rise of Hippocratism, in contrast to Galenism, still drew from ancient inspirations, but it was seen as a progressive, modernizing trend within medicine.¹⁰

Second, new theories and new experiments began to change the way doctors understood both the structure and the functions of the body. Anatomy remained the queen of the medical sciences, and although Vesalius hardly arose out of a vacuum, his anatomical research inspired others to explore not only the surface but also the interior of the body. The organs became better known, and new ones were discovered. As always, those seeking to explain what the organs did reached for the known, familiar items in their world. Humoral physiology continued to be a favorite framework (Vesalius's explanations of function were still largely Galenic, despite his attacks on Galen's anatomy), but other models also surfaced. Followers of Paracelsus favored notions of the body as an elaborate chemical alembic, generally with a variety of occult forces thrown in. With the rise of mechanical philosophy, and the invention of elaborate clocks with automata to strike the hours, mechanical explanations gained purchase. The culmination within our period was Descartes' hypothesis that animals are simply complicated machines, and humans are complicated machines with added souls. The one physiological discovery of the period that stands out in hindsight was William Harvey's revelation of the circulation of the blood, published in 1628. Descartes reinterpreted Harvey for his own mechanical ends, and the notion that the heart is simply a pump, designed to take venous blood and send

it to the lungs, and then take the blood it received from the lungs and send that to the rest of the body, was easy to place within the context of the mechanical philosophy. That was one of its consequences, but it misreads Harvey's aims and intentions. Of all the major figures in the scientific revolution, Harvey was probably the most conservative, deeply influenced by Aristotle and innovative only because his experiments led him to his conclusions.¹¹

The impact of these developments on ideas of health and disease, on medical practice, and on popular notions of how to preserve health and avoid disease, are explored in several of the chapters to follow. As the chapters explicate various aspects of the cultural history of bodies during this period, these background themes surface in many ways. Each of the broader topics covered here could easily be the subject of a separate monograph, so rich are the possibilities. Nevertheless, the chapters' sharper foci open up its specific theme, and the full notes guide readers to the extensive literature in the field. The Renaissance in this volume is primarily European; England, France, and Italy are most densely analyzed, although northern Europe and the wider perceptions of Europeans are also included. We are born, live for a time and die. Or, as T. S. Eliot put it,

Birth, and copulation, and death,
That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks.¹²

This is a stark way of summarizing human (and animal) life, and few people, either in the Renaissance or today, would be quite so brutally blunt. Nevertheless, birth and death are fundamental events in all human cultures, and Lianne McTavish's decision to view both primarily through the birthing chamber produces a powerful impression. Both maternal and infant mortality were relatively high during the period, but a number of legal, gender, social, and medical issues were invoked in the birth bed, especially one in which the child was feared dead, or was born dead or very sickly. The baptism of the child, so important in the Roman Catholic Church, colored attitudes toward the dead or dying infant and could influence the way difficult deliveries were conducted. Protestant confessions tended to be more unambiguous about saving the life of the mother, even if it meant the death of her infant. In practice, in many of these difficult deliveries, both mother and child perished. Physicians or surgeons for the most part were called in only in cases of urgency; as a result, the medical literature probably exaggerated the dangers of childbirth. Midwives or neighbors generally tended uncomplicated deliveries, and these would pass unnoticed in the literature. Toward the end of our period, a few male doctors began to handle routine deliveries, although the male midwife did not become common until the eighteenth century. Even then, however, parturition was still overwhelmingly women's business.¹³

McTavish considers several other problematic aspects of childbirth, including postmortem birth, the much-debated topic of Cesarean section, and supposedly miraculous births after death. She also examines the different attitudes toward death in Catholic and several Protestant confessions, as well as highlighting the perennial fear of many people that they would be buried before they were actually dead. The possibility of awakening in a coffin seems to have terrified many individuals, before and after the Renaissance. Given the nature of medical care and deathbeds, it probably occurred more frequently in earlier periods than it does today, but its rarity has never been correlated with the anxiety it has created.

Anxiety of another sort was central to concern about who fell ill, and why. Margaret Healy contrasts the more public persona of bubonic plague and the private suffering caused by the stone, to dissect the moral dimensions of health and disease in our period. Plague has attracted much historical attention, partly because of its profound economic, social, and societal impact, and more recently, because certain characteristics of the epidemics are hard to explain on the assumption that the plague epidemics that swept Europe between the 1340s and the mid-seventeenth century were caused by the bacterium of modern bubonic plague, *Yersinia pestis*. That speculative and sometimes heated debate is happily beyond the remit of this volume, as people then experienced what they called the plague or pest. The historical consequences of these periodic epidemics can be analyzed without worrying what the disease really was.¹⁴ People at the time gave these scourges both moral and medical meanings, and they saw no conflict in interpreting them as God's punishment for wicked humanity, but at the same time seeking medical help, or submitting (though not always passively) to the stringent series of control measures imposed by European rulers. As the old advice to soldiers put it, "Praise the Lord but keep your powder dry."

Epidemics like the plague invited interpretations that embodied collective sin, guilt, laziness, or social failings, but these collective meanings still left unanswered the altogether trickier question of why some but not all were affected during such communal events. Individual afflictions, such as the all-too-frequent stone, raised other issues. Renal and bladder stones were much more common in earlier periods than they are now. Even today, they are exquisitely painful and frightening. In the Renaissance, when bladder and kidney infections were poorly understood and inadequately treated, and when dietary consumables were largely unregulated, with the consequence that metals and other impurities could be innocently consumed, stones were a real risk for anyone. Healy looks at several sensitive and articulate sufferers from the stone, including Erasmus, Samuel Pepys, and Montaigne. Unsurprisingly, all three men appear in other chapters: their values and the insights they offer through correspondence, diaries, essays, and books have helped to define how we understand their historical epochs.