

Alexander Monro primus and the moral
theatre of anatomy.

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Anita Guerrini

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Alexander Monro *Primus* and the Moral Theatre of Anatomy

Anita Guerrini (bio)

Public anatomy was an important part of public culture in early modern Europe. Its impact can be seen in terms both of the theatricality of public demonstration and of its moral implications. Early modern anatomists endeavored to entertain, to enlighten, to bedazzle, and to offer moral edification, as well as to educate their audiences about the structure of the human body. In this period, public anatomical demonstration became what I call "moral theatre," a demonstration touching on the interconnections between religion, ritual, and secular society. I define moral theatre in the context of anatomy as a public performance intended to induce in its audience such emotions as awe, fear, and compassion—emotions similar to those provoked by religious practices.¹

While historians have discussed eighteenth-century natural philosophy lectures in terms of spectacle, particularly citing displays of electricity, the manipulation of life itself was even more dramatic than electrical experiments.² Live animals were central to the experience of early modern anatomical demonstration. They could demonstrate functions that the human cadaver could not; but in addition, they vested anatomy with broader moral meaning. As with other sorts of natural philosophy, witnessing such events led to a greater appreciation of God's design, and animal experimentation also forced its audience to consider the meaning and purpose of life and death. Since animals acted as stand-ins for humans, the questions of their moral status and their experience of pain were implicit in the act of experimentation. To the multiple meanings of anatomy, animals added several complex and perhaps discomfiting lessons. These meanings, in addition, changed over time, and what was unproblematic to Vesalius in the sixteenth century was not necessarily so to eighteenth-century investigators and witnesses, who operated under different standards of behavior.³

The lectures of Alexander Monro *primus* (1697–1767), Professor of Anatomy at Edinburgh University in the first half of the eighteenth century, provide one **[End Page 1]** example of the practice of moral anatomy in this period. In his specific context, Monro employed diverse

concepts and practices of his predecessors and contemporaries. These included styles of lecturing, the use of anatomical preparations, the use of spectacle as *memento mori*, and the changing use of animals. At the same time, the Glasgow philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) discussed the question of compassion and proposed that witnessing acts of cruelty gave spectators an opportunity to experience compassion, and therefore that cruelty in certain circumstances was justified. Monro and Hutcheson, I suggest, in keeping with contemporary opinion, which included a growing acknowledgment of the value of sensibility, shared the view that the main purpose of public anatomy was to serve as a "virtuous performance." In this essay, I hope to outline an ethnography of Monro's anatomy lectures, a "thick description" that will define these shared assumptions about public anatomy and its use of animals. This ethnography is necessarily based mainly on texts, rather than on direct observation.⁴

One assumption had to do with the purpose of anatomy itself. Monro customarily ended his lectures on the history of anatomy with a disquisition on its uses. First on the list was not medicine or surgery, but natural theology. Medicine was fifth on his list, following forensics, natural philosophy, and art.⁵ This list reveals much about early modern anatomy, which served far broader cultural purposes than simply to teach what the human body looked like. Medical knowledge was only one of many motivations for doing anatomy. In his lectures on the history of anatomy, with which he commenced his course, Monro elaborated:

There is no condition of Life, or manner of Study almost but what may at least be improved by the knowledge of the Structure of Animals, and to others of them absolutely necessary in a few. . . . When a serious mind considers the innumerable incredibly fine threads on which the Movements of his whole Bodie depends . . . surely this Reflection must make him acknowledge his own littleness, and adore the unbounded Beneficence of his great Creator and most mercifull Preserver.⁶

Historians such as Andrea Carlino and Jonathan Sawday have recently looked at the cultural significance of...

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University of California, Santa Barbara

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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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