Bodies of Knowledge

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Patrizia Bettella. *The Ugly Woman: Transgressive Aesthetic Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2005. Pp. viii+259. ISBN 0-8020-3926-X.

Nicola McDonald, ed. *Medieval Obscenities*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, for York Medieval Press, 2006. Pp. viii+210. 21 b/w illustrations. ISBN 1 903153 18 2.

Katharine Park. *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* Brooklyn, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2006. Pp. 419. 62 b/w illustrations. ISBN 1-890951-67-6.

Carole Rawcliffe. *Leprosy in Medieval England*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006. Pp. xiii+421. 34 b/w illustrations, 6 maps. ISBN 1 84383 273 9.

As different in approach and range as they undoubtedly are, these four books all share an interest in medieval representational practices out of which complex ideas and theories concerning bodies — indeed, out of which different bodies — emerge. Katharine Park's *Secrets of Women* is a wonderfully rich study of anatomy and dissection in northern Italy as it developed from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century; Carole Rawcliffe's *Leprosy in Medieval England* offers a dense and detailed examination of the treatment and theories surrounding leprosy in late medieval England; Nicola McDonald's wide-ranging collection of essays explores a plethora of medieval obscenities and related issues; and Patrizia Bettella's *The Ugly Woman* examines the role of this reviled figure in Italian poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque.

Between them, they cover the period roughly from the second to the sixteenth century CE (for the purposes of this review, I focus on Bettella's medieval material) and offer the reader fascinating insights into the diverse approaches to this topic which have developed over the past thirty years.

In this sense, they follow in the footsteps of such books as Peter Brown's *The Body and Society* (1988), Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987) or *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991), Sarah Beckwith's *Christ's Body* (1993), Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin's edited collection, *Framing Medieval Bodies* (1994), and Dyan Elliott's *Fallen Bodies* (1999), to name just a few. Of course, the body has figured in one way or another in innumerable other works within medieval studies: works interested in questions of gender, sexuality, race, religion, community, literature, and so on. As Peter Burke puts it, "From the early 1980s [. . .] a growing stream of studies has been concerned with male and female bodies, with the body as experience and as symbol, with dismembered bodies, anorexic bodies, athletic bodies, dissected bodies and the bodies of saints and sinners."[1] In diverse ways, the books under review here follow these predecessors. They all share a concern with representations of the body (in a range of discourses and media) and what these reveal about specific contexts, historical shifts, and existing power relations. They also engage with other, related issues familiar to medievalists: the problem of developing a nuanced and adequate vocabulary that acknowledges (while not reifying) temporal difference and historical alterity, and the persistence of prevailing popular as well as scholarly stereotypes of medieval attitudes and practices.

Critical Language

The question of a critical vocabulary is taken up repeatedly and most overtly in McDonald's *Medieval Obscenities*, a collection that includes essays on such diverse topics as obscene sound in Dante's *Inferno* (Emma Dillon); the obscenity of troubadour lyrics (Simon Gaunt); late medieval legal depositions and what they reveal about changing attitudes to the body in York (Jeremy Goldberg); the impact of a Christian worldview on the sexually explicit Graeco-Roman literature in late antiquity (Danuta Shanzer); the obscene imagination in Old English poetry (Glenn Davis); changing connotations and uses of disgust in moralizing discourses (Carolyne Larrington); Irish

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1 Burke, *What is Cultural History,* 70.

sheela-na-gigs (Eamonn Kelly); late medieval theories of the relationship between obscene language and obscene things (Alastair Minnis); and grotesque medieval arses at Bourges cathedral (Michael Camille). The sheer variety of cultural productions of obscenity reflected in this collection reminded me of Tom Lehrer's song "Smut": "Bring on the obscene movies, murals, postcards, neckties, samplers, stained-glass windows, tattoos, anything! More, more, I'm still not satisfied!"

Most of the essays tackle the question whether the meanings and uses of 'medieval obscenity' can be addressed adequately with a contemporary understanding of the term. This involves consideration of two aspects: the theoretical and methodological question how the contemporary scholar is to address the question of obscenity in relation to a past that may well have understood the term differently and, secondly, the displacement (or effacement) of obscene material *within* the medieval period itself, due mainly to religious change. Both aspects are concerned with the processes of making objects of study visible or invisible: of delineating or erasing the topic-to-be-studied.

McDonald's view that there is a lack of critical vocabulary available to scholars interested in discussing medieval obscenity is echoed by other contributors. Dillon asks whether it is useful to assume a medieval category of 'the obscene' at all, or whether it would be more accurate and productive to think of its being understood primarily as a boundary-testing device, "a means of exploring the possibilities of literary representation and narrative."[2] Others try to set out their understanding of the term in relation to their material: Gaunt explains that he uses 'obscene' as "a word or expression that designates explicitly, possibly even with vulgarity, sex or a sexual part of the body, in a way that some at least are likely to find offensive,"[3] while Shanzer argues that "Obscenity is notoriously linked to violence," especially sexual violence, as well as scatology.[4] Tracing the various and changing definitions of 'obscene' provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Larrington chooses to work with the definition "offensive to the senses, or to taste or refinement; disgusting, etc.," described in the first edition as "archaic" but no longer designated as such in the second.[5]

Shanzer, Dillon, and Camille in particular show both the complexities *within* medieval, and differences *between* contemporary and medieval, understandings and

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2 Dillon, "Representing Obscene Sound," 62.
3 Gaunt, "Obscene Hermeneutics in Troubadour Lyric," 85.
4 Shanzer, "Latin Literature, Christianity and Obscenity in the Later Roman West," 197 and 199.
5 Larrington, "Diet, Defecation and the Devil: Disgust and the Pagan Past," 138.

uses of the obscene. Shanzer argues that what counted as obscene in late antique writings may appear "sexual rather than obscene to modern sensibilities."[6] Noting that while "medieval and modern writers alike found consensus on the *effects* of the obscene — offence, outrage, shock — the *causes* [. . .] are much more fluid," Dillon focuses on obscenity's connection with "emotional and physical excess," its link to *ecstasis*, in medieval contexts.[7] This connection, Dillon argues, suggests that "medieval obscenity is often far removed from the more modern preoccupations of taboos and censorship": the "consonances between the obscene and ecstatic remind us that obscenity was also a way of articulating the dimensions of human experience that were so intense, embodied and alluring as to be unbearable."[8] Music serves as Dillon's example: the ravishment of the senses through sound was a radically ambiguous experience, which could signal either demonic or divine influence.

Camille identifies "four key problems with modern approaches to the obscene in medieval art," which deserve to be quoted in full as they are relevant to the collection as a whole and raise problems that are only too familiar to medievalists, both in relation to their own work and in relation to debates over, for instance, the applicability of modern concepts or theoretical frameworks to medieval contexts and cultural products:

> First: our use of modern medicalized and identity-based terminology for categories of experience that were culturally specific to the Middle Ages. Second: our assumption, following Bakhtin, that the obscene is marginal and other to the sacred; so-called 'profane' church art demonstrates instead that obscenity was produced from within the sacred and not always in opposition to it. Third: our imagining that the obscene, again like Bakhtin, is always socially recuperative and anti-establishment; much of what we now call obscenity in medieval sculpture is, rather, an integral part of the intended, official programme. Fourth: our failure to realize that the obscene is in fact a modern category.[9]

Camille's "four key problems" suggest some of the debates about methodology in the past three decades, as well as revealing the diversity of approaches within medieval

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6 Shanzer, "Latin Literature, Christianity and Obscenity," 181.
7 Dillon, "Representing Obscene Sound," 60 and 82.
8 Dillon, "Representing Obscene Sound," 84.
9 Camille, "Dr Witkowski's Anus: French Doctors, German Homosexuals and the Obscene in Medieval Church Art," 36.

studies more generally. In relation to this collection they also highlight some weaknesses. For Camille's contention that "the obscene is in fact a modern category" appears to contradict Minnis's contribution in particular, which is careful to delineate a medieval understanding of the term. It also raises questions about other terms and categories employed by some of the contributors. I am thinking here of Davis's thesis that the sexual content of the riddles of the Exeter Book should be treated not as a unique case but as "a point of contact" with other Old English literary genres.[10] Davis argues that the language of, for instance, *Beowulf* or *Genesis B*, though not overtly sexualized (which he appears to treat as synonymous with obscene), is nonetheless covertly so, in order to circumvent Church prohibition on material of a sexual nature: what Davis terms a hidden "sexual idiom." His reading of these texts as "rebellious"[11] (*contra* Camille) is interesting but not entirely persuasive — mainly because the moments discussed are so subtle that their alleged obscenity might easily not be there at all, and also because Davis does not make clear in what way he understands them as constituting obscenity in particular. Similarly, Goldberg's use of the term "pornographic" is not defined either in relation to a medieval context or in relation to the category of the obscene. Such interesting and potentially productive (but also perhaps problematic) differences could have been discussed in an afterword, which could also have pointed out the ways in which different chapters complement one another (Minnis's work chimes obviously with Dillon's, for example), thus adding to the coherence of a volume whose scope is intentionally broad and, overall, effectively so.

Representational Practices

As mentioned above, Minnis begins his contribution by tracing the etymology of the word "obscene," drawing on Giovanni de'Balbi's thirteenth-century Latin dictionary to show that it was either understood as being "made up from *ob* (on account of) and *cenum* (dirt or filth)," or as "relate[ing] to *cena*, i.e. *scena*, the stage," or to "*canendo*, singing or making sound."[12] Minnis's interest lies in "The connection between dirty words and dirty things";[13] this concern between representational practices and that which emerges from them is central to all four books here under review. Furthermore,

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10   Davis, "The Exeter Book Riddles and the Place of Sexual Idiom in Old English Literature," 54.
11   Davis, "The Exeter Book Riddles," 54.
12   Minnis, "From *Coilles* to *Bel Chose*: Discourses of Obscenity in Jean de Meun and Chaucer," 156.
13   Minnis, "From *Coilles* to *Bel Chose*," 156.

the instability of this thirteenth-century etymology of "obscene" points towards the intersection or contingency of such representational practices themselves. What is highlighted repeatedly in these books is the pervasive presence and influence of Christian theology in medical, juridical, literary, and other discourses. Shanzer argues that the "advent of repressive Christian mores and Christianity's distinctive social control of sexuality" affected the role and type of obscene vocabulary in a range of literary genres, moving from what she calls "*primary* obscenities" towards metaphor and euphemism.[14] Generic associations, as well as the redeployment of form and language, also encourage connections to be made between even seemingly antithetical discourses. Thus, Gaunt's argument, that obscene lyrics "redeploy, mimic and parody" the dominant courtly literary form echoes Dillon's observation that the same melody was used and reused for songs with either sacred or obscene content.[15]

Bettella's study of the figure of the 'ugly woman' can also usefully be read in conjunction with some of the chapters in McDonald's collection, for obscenity was frequently (if not predictably) gendered. Thus, Kelly describes sheela-na-gigs as "grotesque sculptures" portraying "hideous and ugly" women in a manner that emphasises their genitalia, and Minnis, citing the work of Jan Ziolkowski, notes that "if 'any collection of individuals was implicated strongly in obscene language and was perceived to be habitual offenders, that group was old women'."[16] Judging by Bettella's account, it seems that the rhetoric of female ugliness considered it virtually inextricable from advanced age, at least in "the comic-realistic poetry of the Middle Ages, which had established a true genre of the old hag."[17] In these writings, female old age symbolizes "decay, evil, and sexual excess" and was closely related to characteristics such as hypocrisy and deceptiveness.[18] Gender here intersects not only with age but also with physiological, spiritual, and economic as well as marital status. Thus, "Physical ugliness is typical of demonic creatures, devils, witches and, more generally, of individuals linked with deviancy, transgression, and marginality," as well as those "of lower social class."[19]

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14 Shanzer, "Latin Literature, Christianity and Obscenity," 180 and 185.

15 Gaunt, "Obscene Hermeneutics in Troubadour Lyric," 88; Dillon, "Representing Obscene Sound," 58-59.

16 Kelly, "Irish Sheela-na-gigs and Related Figures with Reference to the Collections of the National Museum of Ireland," 124, 131. Minnis, "From *Coilles* to *Bel Chose*," 166, quoting Ziolkowski, "The Obscenities of Old Women," 73.

17 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 7.

18 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 6.

19 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 17.

In the medieval poems Bettella discusses, older women's bodies are the products of poetry as well as being that which makes this kind of poetic language possible, for they are what allows poets to perform their rhetorical skills, their familiarity with classical literary models, and their 'wit':

> In attacking the old woman, ballads and *canzonette* employ amplification, accumulation, and base language and provide detailed, orderly descriptions of the old disgusting body. These texts inflict on the old woman a verbal retribution through perfect rhetorical skills.[20]

The gap between the body that is figured as uncontrollable — in general because of its troublesome desires and physical processes, but also particularly in the case of female bodies because of their greater carnality and openness, and even more so in the case of older female bodies in which these qualities are amplified — and the controlled use of language displayed by the poet, which also contrasts with the alleged incontinence of women's speech, presumably offers a pleasurable frisson to the poet and audience. However, these detailed depictions, in seeking to present the ageing female body as excessive, are themselves (linguistically) excessive in a way that threatens to undermine such an opposition. Instead, the dependence of each on the other as the condition for existence suggests itself: this body *allows* the (male) poet to speak, to *become* a poet, even as he recreates it.

Age and ugliness also undercut or work against the gendering of that body as female: on the one hand, old women are represented as hyper-feminine, in the sense that all negative feminine qualities are shown to be distilled to their most potent and pure form in them; on the other, they are masculinized, through their assertive behaviour and the absence (or distortion) of any of the stereotypical physical markers associated with femininity. However, Bettella's claim that "The patriarchal system cannot envision any role for the older woman" is arguably contradicted by the poetry she examines, which only too insistently envisions such roles.[21] Bettella also notes that the older woman is "relegated to the margins of society" but does not address the discrepancy between that position and the centrality of this figure to the poetic imaginary.[22] The discussion here tends to slip loosely between rather general and under-explored statements about social practice, on the one hand, and

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20 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 55.
21 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 80.
22 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 80.

detailed readings of individual literary representations, on the other. Overall, this book, while interesting, would benefit from fuller theoretical development. Bettella claims that her work "takes a first step in bridging the gap in the study of antifeminist bias in Italian comic poetry,"[23] but it seems odd, then, that she should not have drawn on the very considerable body of scholarship on gender in other medieval literatures such as French and English, including, among many others, Simon Gaunt's *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (1995). As a result, some of the readings presented here will seem familiar and perhaps less nuanced than one might wish.

Truth, Body, and Soul

Rawcliffe explains the relationship thus:

> In a pre-Cartesian society, which regarded the human body as a frail but necessary lodging for the soul, it naturally followed that the welfare of one would intimately affect the other. Writers of medical literature were as concerned about gluttony, wrath and sexual indulgence as theologians and homilists.[24]

One famous example that confirms this interdependency of body and soul while also revealing a concern to differentiate between the two — or, rather, to affirm their hierarchy — is found, of course, in Canon 22 of the Fourth Lateran Council, which states that

> Since bodily infirmity is sometimes caused by sin [...] we declare in the present decree and strictly command that when physicians of the body are called to the bedside of the sick, before all else they admonish them to call for the physician of souls, so that after spiritual health has been restored to them, the application of bodily medicine may be of greater benefit, for the cause being removed the effect will pass away. [...] If any physician shall transgress this decree after it has been published by bishops, let him be cut off (*arceatur*) from the Church till he has made suitable satisfaction for his transgression.[25]

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23 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 4.
24 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 64.
25 available at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.html

The mutual dependence of body and soul explains the idea that physical appearance could be read as indicative of a person's 'inner' moral condition. This is a central theme in the medieval Italian poetry which Bettella discusses as well as in Shanzer's chapter in *Medieval Obscenities* and in the books by Rawcliffe and Park.

Bettella, drawing on the work of Brian Vickers, outlines how "epideictic rhetoric becomes moralized," thus turning "rhetorics [into] a propagator of accepted moral systems," which offer guidelines on "how to live appropriately and to recognize and reject vice."[26] Particular bodies teach their audiences important lessons about moral virtues and sin. This is especially evident with regard to allegorical figures — as Bettella notes, some representations of old women's bodies share similarities with the ways in which "medieval sculptures defin[e] the personification of Luxuria or Lust."[27] That the identification of particular types of bodiliness with sin is historically specific is highlighted by Larrington, who explores how the medieval Church in Scandinavia "recategorized" behaviours already regarded as socially unacceptable, such as "gluttony, lust and sloth," as sinful; disgust was central to this process, which "sought to produce aversion to sin" and to warn of the dangers of bodily desires in particular.[28] That spiritual or 'inner' sins could be rendered visible through bodily illness and its physical symptoms was a widely accepted idea. Giving the example of a metaphorical reading of blotches on the skin as "blotches of heresy," Rawcliffe notes that "Such an approach provided fertile ground for a range of metaphors that embraced every part of the body and every conceivable act of transgression, from laziness to apostasy."[29] Thus, bodies were moralized and morals corporealized.

This *exemplary* role of bodies — particularly of female bodies — emerges most clearly in Park's book. As Park writes in her Introduction, "This book [. . .] is about women's bodies and men's attempts to know them, and through them to know their own."[30] Medical writings about women's anatomy (with their focus on the uterus as central to female mental and physical health) and religious writings concerning women's spiritual potential (with their increasing admiration for and preoccupation with its affective, 'inward' nature) intersect and inform each other, with the result that the interior of the female body is rendered mysterious twice over. Mysterious, but

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26 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 16, citing Vickers, "Epideictic and Epic in the Renaissance," 502.
27 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 64.
28 Larrington, "Diet, Defecation and the Devil," 140-41.
29 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 111.
30 Park, *Secrets*, 38.

also the locus of important truths: procreative and supernatural. The importance attributed to these truths made it all the more imperative that what was conceived of as a secret inside should be opened up for inspection since "The answers to all these questions [concerning procreation, legitimacy etc.] lay inside the female body":[31]

> Given th[e] emphasis on both the corporeality and the inwardness of women's religious inspiration, it is no coincidence that the bodies of holy women were opened and inspected beginning in the early fourteenth century, while the first known autopsy of a holy man (Ignatius Loyola) took place two hundred fifty years later, in 1556.[32]

The desire for visible proofs to validate what the female body produced, be it children, visions, or potentially holy bodily relics, was driven by a concern over legitimacy. Park relates the case of Chiara of Montefalco, whose canonization proceedings not only "involved the testimony of 486 witnesses on 315 interrogatory articles" but also represented the first occasion on which "physical evidence — in the form of signs found *inside* a potential saint's body — occup[ied] such a decisive position in authenticating her sanctity."[33] Park sees this new development as resulting from the shifts in female religious life in Italy in the thirteenth century, led by the mendicant orders, which focused on "a life of penance, poverty, and urban religious activism."[34] The desire for visible proof also signals an anxiety about the nature of the forces shaping holy women's experiences. Thus, Park shows that the collection of testimonies in Chiara's case "illustrates the various problems posed by female visionaries [. . .] and the pressing need to exclude other explanations for the bodily phenomena associated with her holiness — natural illness, human fraud, and demonic possession — before her sanctity could be accepted as confirmed."[35]

The multiplicity of influences working upon the body is a central theme of medieval medical discourse as discussed by Rawcliffe and Park. The human body's position on the threshold of physical and spiritual forces and significations meant that phenomena affecting the body — illness, for instance — was understood as a sign of spiritual malaise or could be used as a means of spiritual elevation. Rawcliffe shows

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31 Park, *Secrets*, 26.
32 Park, *Secrets*, 35.
33 Park, *Secrets*, 54.
34 Park, *Secrets*, 54.
35 Park, *Secrets*, 58.

how lepers could function variously as means by which their patrons could gain divine favour for themselves — rendering the sick "little more than ciphers whose principal value lay in their usefulness to others" — or as visible manifestations of sin: "*lepra* almost always ranked as an individual punishment, incurred, like madness, because of personal misdeeds."[36] Related to such theological developments as the doctrine of purgatory, as well as to changes in medical ideas relating to corrupt air and contagion, medieval leprosy's connotations fluctuated between proof of divine punishment and proof of divine favour.[37] A consideration of Rawcliffe's argument in relation to ideas concerning grotesque bodies put forward by, for instance, Camille in *Medieval Obscenities* raises questions about Bettella's more categorical assertion that "In the medieval mentality beauty and ugliness are opposite categories."[38] While this may well be true of the poetry Bettella is discussing, ugliness or grotesqueness emerges as yet another category that is variable and multivalent, depending on context. The 'ugliness' of the leper is not "confined to the realm of vituperation"[39] — it seems to have also marked the leper, at least sometimes, as the object of grace.

The body emerges here not only as unstable and vulnerable but also as the confirmed site of and evidence for natural and supernatural phenomena, thus becoming increasingly the limit case for a range of categories considered as central to individual and social experience. While it has often been noted that the body was understood as a microcosmic version of the macrocosm in medieval thought, we see also that this microcosm is the main means by which that macrocosm can be discerned, experienced, and understood. Both mirror and conduit, it is subject to the workings of natural and supernatural processes, which inscribe themselves on and in it, leaving signs that must be found, interpreted, and verified (or classified). The resulting plethora of interpretative possibilities becomes evident in Rawcliffe's discussion of leprosy, and reveals a complexity of approach that, Rawcliffe argues, is often not acknowledged in the persistent stereotype of the medieval leper as outcast: "definitions of what constituted *lepra* were not only tantalisingly imprecise, but also subject to a range of shifting social, cultural, moral and even linguistic imperatives"; thus, "although sexual promiscuity and other forms of indulgence were believed to precipitate the onset of leprosy in vulnerable individuals, factors such as heredity, extreme anxiety, bad

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36 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 6 and 53.
37 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 52ff.
38 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 20.
39 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 21.

air and celestial forces lay beyond personal control and thus escaped moral censure."[40] Because the body was understood as the site upon or within which these influences worked and became manifest, it increasingly became viewed as the privileged and authentic source for knowledge.

Seeing and Knowing

Park shows how the female body in particular became the focus for those searching for anatomical or religious truth:

> In both cases [paintings of holy women and woodcuts of female corpses], the woman represents the epistemological power of unmediated experience: it is better to hear celestial harmonies directly than mediated by metal, wood, and leather; it is better to study anatomy through dissection than mediated by paper and ink.[41]

However, this 'immediate' knowledge is then translated (back) into texts and images, which in turn bestow authority upon the predominantly male mediator handling that translation. Park argues that both the painting of the holy woman and the woodcut of the female corpse insinuate "a crucial figure [. . .] the man whose expertise has made meaning of the revelation in question."[42]

That this process of authorization is not altogether straightforwardly gendered is shown by the discussion of another strand of thought touched on by Park, Rawcliffe, and Bettella: the nature of vision as theorized by medieval thinkers. Understood as both active and passive, vision revealed the interactive and *mutually* transformative nature of the relationship between what might now be differentiated as subject and object. While Bettella, drawing on Laura Mulvey's and Mary Ann Doane's work on the gendered gaze in relation to film, argues that the active gaze is clearly gendered as male in the Middle Ages, Park, referring to more recent work on the gaze by the medievalist Suzannah Biernoff, notes that the medieval understanding of vision was based on a model of "reciprocity and mimesis."[43] This reciprocity, suggests Park, means that "the equation of the feminine with passive objectification

40   Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 4 and 6.
41   Park, *Secrets*, 198.
42   Park, *Secrets*, 198.
43   Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 43-44, citing Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 83. Park, *Secrets*, 73.

and the masculine with active subjectivity" is rendered "unconvincing."[44] Consideration of this model would have offered Bettella a fruitful avenue of exploration, not least because it opens up the possibility of a more complex relationship between male speaker, old woman, and love interest in the poems she discusses. The male speaker's contempt could thereby be read as expressing not just outrage at the old woman's usurpation of the active gaze, but as a moment of uncomfortable recognition and identification with her, as he looks at her. This also complicates their relationship to the beautiful young woman, which both of them are gazing upon. As Park notes, citing Biernoff, "'To see was to become similar to one's object.'"[45]

Park also notes the potential passivity of *all* viewers by referring to the medieval idea that "images spoke, bled, and palpably altered the bodies of their viewers."[46] By the mid-sixteenth century, Park sees at least two models of vision operating, which were not "mutually exclusive," namely, "one based on identification, the other on (gendered) difference," both models being "reinforced by contemporary views of sex difference, which were also premised simultaneously on similarity and difference": women's anatomies were essentially the same as men's but their bodies were also radically different.[47] Yet — and here Park comes closer to Bettella's argument — while there was an interactive model of vision, it was thought to affect men and women in differing degrees:

> the female viewer, like the female object of vision, expressed both the powers and the vulnerabilities of sight in their starkest form. Possessed of porous, soft, moist bodies, they were particularly impressionable as viewers [. . .].
>   This impressionability was understood as moral and spiritual as well as physical.[48]

Rawcliffe takes up the idea of impressionability in her discussion of the perceived danger of lepers to the health of others, for it was feared that leprosy could enter the body of the healthy viewer through the eye. (A parallel case can be found in Bettella's discussion of the figure of the old woman understood as "an effective antidote to love sickness" in "both literary and medical discourse."[49]) Rawcliffe argues, drawing

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44 Park, *Secrets*, 72.
45 Park, *Secrets*, 73, quoting Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 137.
46 Park, *Secrets*, 72-73.
47 Park, *Secrets*, 255.
48 Park, *Secrets*, 73.
49 Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 39.

on Aristotelian ideas, that the eye was understood, "like the uterus," as a "passive [...] organ" that

> received sensory impressions from the outside world and transmitted them
> along the optic nerve to the brain. These impressions travelled through the
> air as 'forms', 'virtues' or 'similitudes', which radiated outwards in a con-
> tinuous sequence of multiple images from all visible objects and were
> regarded by some late medieval commentators as real, tangible entities. In
> view of the intimate relationship between the brain and the spirits, the like-
> lihood that such images would affect the body in direct and immediate
> ways seemed obvious.[50]

Evil influence could be counteracted by avoiding contagion, by avoiding the sight of potentially dangerous images, objects or individuals, but also by the individual's adherence to protective and purifying bodily and spiritual practices: fresh air *and* prayer.

Like Park, Rawcliffe emphasizes the overlapping concerns and expertise of med-ical writers and clergy, noting that "the most prominent 'medically informed experts' of twelfth- and thirteenth-century England were either monks or members of the secular clergy" and that this convergence was manifest until the Reformation.[51] Park, in contrast, traces both shared interests and diverging trajectories in the period and region she is focusing on, while also outlining the shifting power relations between female health practitioners, such as midwives, and the male expert emerging from the professionalization of medicine. Park concludes that women were increasingly mar-ginalized from developing medical discourses because their knowledge, mostly based on a rather limited range of experience and passed on by word of mouth, could not compete with professionalized medical discourse, which authorized itself increas-ingly through dissection and written media, which were not only less ephemeral than oral traditions but also circulated more widely and more publicly:

> Because the vast majority of women were illiterate, especially the working
> women from whose ranks midwives and female practitioners were drawn,
> and because Italian midwives were not organized into guilds or the kind of
> occupational association that would formalize the oral and empirical trans-
> mission of knowledge, there was a strict limit on their ability to pass on

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50 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 94-95.
51 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 162.

> the knowledge that any woman or group of women might accumulate over a lifetime of practice — especially regarding unusual or problematic conditions — or even to create records for personal use.[52]

Park's and Rawcliffe's monographs, as well as McDonald's collection, offer fascinating and subtle studies of the body's centrality and authorizing potential for a range of complexly interrelated medieval practices and discourses, the circumstances which shape 'bodies of knowledge,' and the bodies that emerge from such knowledges. Yet in one way or another, all of the works being reviewed here also add to, repudiate, or challenge existing perceptions of medieval attitudes — to dissection, leprosy, obscenity, and female ugliness.

Rawcliffe devotes her opening chapter, "Creating the Medieval Leper: Some Myths and Misunderstandings," to unravelling the myths, which she sees as still prevalent in contemporary popular conceptions as well as in scholarship, concerning medieval attitudes to and treatment of lepers. She argues that these persistent beliefs are firmly entrenched in nineteenth-century British colonial agendas, and outlines how administrators used the alleged medieval preference for absolute segregation of lepers to justify their own 'contagionist' attitudes: "It was, then, the victorious contagionists who not only created a model of leprosy as a dangerously communicable disease, but also to a notable extent constructed its history," a history which was furthered, Rawcliffe claims, by "scholars as influential as Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas and R. I. Moore."[53] Her book sets out to show that medieval responses to leprosy "were far more complex, diverse and subject to change over time than the majority of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers would have us believe."[54]

In a similar vein, Park sets out to refute the "misconception," which is "still widespread," that "religion and science [were] diametrically opposed cultural enterprises" in the Middle Ages — a view which she also traces back to the nineteenth century.[55] While Rawcliffe's and Park's books focus on different geographical locales — England and northern Italy, respectively — they share concerns about medical theory and praxis, especially the ways in which they intersect with prevailing attitudes to gender and religion and their dependence on economic factors.

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52 Park, *Secrets*, 258, citing Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, Conclusion.
53 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 27 and 28.
54 Rawcliffe, *Leprosy*, 17.
55 Park, *Secrets*, 21.

In her Introduction to *Medieval Obscenities*, McDonald notes that obscenity as a concept is not usually discussed in relation to the medieval period; that it is, in fact, seen as quintessentially *modern*. In his contribution to the collection, Goldberg picks up on this idea when he critiques the teleological model that locates pornography as a phenomenon that begins to emerge only with the advent of the early modern period. He argues that medievalists are in a good position to challenge such periodizations, as they are "unconstrained by the paradigm of the 'great transformation' or the need to see the 'early modern' era as intrinsically different."[56] In a similar vein, Camille's essay begins by retrieving the medieval obscene from the grip of nineteenth-century French scholars, who sought to claim Gothic art either for a Middle Ages seen as pure and untainted by later prudishness or for a Middle Ages that was cast as anticlerical and democratic. Camille argues for a reading of the 'medieval bum' as a *social* rather than a *sexual* sign — the latter designation being for him indicative of the nineteenth-century "process of medicalization" and the creation of "medico-legal" categories.[57] Reading the anus as a social sign is to take into account its locatedness; Camille concludes punningly that "The obscene is fundamentally dependent upon place."[58] This tendency to consider post-medieval constructions of the Middle Ages, both within and outside the academy, is perhaps a result of the growing interest in and scholarly acceptance of the study of medievalism. Rawcliffe in particular shows how fruitful a combination of medievalism with medieval studies (a tricky line to draw) can be. I would have been very interested in learning more about what insights the misconceptions of past (and present) medievalisms offer to these scholars in relation to their own projects, but as we all know, and as Kathleen Biddick argued so persuasively in "Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible," marking out a particular topic for consideration involves a certain disregard of other categories. Many of the scholars whose work is discussed here are well known for publications in similar or related areas of study. The discourses and practices examined in these books, as well as the approaches to them, are not always strikingly or radically new in themselves, yet all of these books present valuable contributions to the diverse — and by no means exhausted — discussions surrounding 'the body' in medieval culture.

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56   Goldberg, "John Skathelok's Dick: Voyeurism and 'Pornography' in Late Medieval England," 123.
57   Camille, "Dr Witkowski's Anus," 19 and 22.
58   Camille, "Dr Witkowski's Anus," 23.

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