Thinking through Death: The Politics of the Corpse

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Consider this: traveling through Iraq in the early seventeenth century, the composer and long-distance traveler Pietro Della Valle (1586–1652) found himself bereaved after the untimely death of his young wife, Sitti Maani. Having decided that he wanted Maani to be buried with him in the Church of Aracoeli atop the Roman Campidoglio, or precisely that he wanted to be buried as close as possible to a part of her body, her heart, he chose to have her corpse heavily embalmed. Since it was believed at the time that the dead would resurrect where either the head or the heart was buried, Della Valle became fixated on the condition of his wife's heart. To safeguard it together with her corpse he had a suitable casket prepared. The foreign land he was visiting, however, had no iron nail sufficient for providing the airtightness needed to preserve the cadaver for the long journey back home that he was anticipating, so he commissioned the manufacture of one hundred ninety nails to shut the casket properly on all sides. He then had it wrapped to make it impermeable and had it covered with animal hide for further safekeeping. And so the dead and the living traveled together for the next five years until the musician reached Rome in 1626 and was able to properly bury his wife in his chosen site.[1]

Or consider this: Gabriele Falloppio (or Falloppia, 1523–1562), professor at the University of Padua and the first anatomist to describe in its entirety the female reproductive system, was rumored to have developed a close, in fact for many a much too close, relationship with his Prussian pupil, the botanist Melchiorre Wieland (1520–1589), better known as Guilandinus, a "gentile hermaphrodito," according to the sardonic name-calling of the herbalist Pier Andrea Mattioli. In due time, the two decided to share the same household—a choice that fueled Falloppio's fears that sooner or later inquisitors would take an uncomfortably close look into their arrangement. Thus he backed Guilandinus's desire to travel to Egypt and Syria to

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document new plants, and eventually he himself traveled all the way across the Mediterranean to ransom for two hundred *scudi* his student/lover who had fallen into slavery, following capture by Saracen pirates off the coast of Africa. When Falloppio died, the inconsolable Guilandinus, who later became the celebrated prefect of the Botanical Garden in Padua, had this lament inscribed on his companion's tomb: "Falloppio, in this tomb you will not be buried alone / With you will also be buried our home."[2] The intimate relationship between the two apparently became in later years so much a part of the local university folklore that when Falloppio's crypt in the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua had to be moved in the eighteenth century to make room for a northern door, a certain "pious gentleman" made the decision to rebury Falloppio's bones together with those of Guilandinus, thus reuniting forever the two friends who feared they were too close for comfort when alive.[3]

Unusual? Not really. When Petrarch's huge marble tomb was reopened one last time on the seven-hundredth anniversary of his birth in 2004, a DNA study of the cranium found in the casket revealed it to be not that of a man, but of a woman. Yet no female cranium was present when the tomb had been officially opened last in 1873. In fact, it has been argued that the anthropologist Giovanni Canestrini, who had been commissioned by the authorities to conduct this earlier archaeological inspection, accidentally dropped Petrarch's own skull when examining it, given his suspicious description of how the cranium disintegrated in his hands when he was manipulating it.[4] Thus, it was unlikely that any skull at all should be in Petrarch's thoroughly sealed casket one hundred thirty-one years later. Was this new finding a prank, or was it another surprise concocted by an unnamed "pious gentleman" to reunite the poet with the ethereal and yet so present "Laura" figure of his sonnets?

What these narratives illustrate, among hundreds of others that would have proven just as pertinent, is that dying, preparing to pass away, wishing to die, disposing of someone's bones or ashes, and enacting funerary practices is a complicated, often ingenious and at times agonizing business. Culturally inflected customs, religious beliefs, moral values, political expediencies, and social conventions accompany death and determine each step of a corpse's disposal. If Della Valle's choices described above foreground his fear of decomposition and denial of the nothingness that dying forebodes, the narratives of Falloppio and Petrarch show a postmortem desire on the part of the living to commemorate deaths by actualizing not the wishes of the grave's occupants but more personal fantasies of the living. Corpses are useful only to those who are alive. Take corpse medicine, an eagerly sought therapeutic treatment marrying the living and the dead: *mumia*, defined by the French surgeon Ambroise Paré (1510–1590) as "man's flesh from . . . Arabia," was a bestseller in all European markets to fight disease or humoral imbalance, even though for lack of supply pharmacists readily concocted it from the flesh of executed criminals or vagabonds.[5] Just like today, when medical technologies can maintain the life of a person through the use of body parts from cadavers.

It is difficult to imagine how all-pervasive death was in premodern and early modern experience. Life expectancy, for one, was seriously diminished by poor hygiene, gastrointestinal disease, and lack of adequate medical know-how; approximately half of newborn babies were buried by their grieving parents within three years of their birth; recurring epidemics decimated entire regions or put in motion the famine that would dispatch many folks in later years; and even successful deliveries hardly kept mothers safe from deadly puerperal fevers. The majority of Christians at the time believed that the corruption of a cadaver was the inevitable result of original sin and could be retarded by treating it with the preserving agent of medicinal herbs. Embalming was done routinely for the body of supposed saints; even today the Italian "in odore di santità" means both "saintly" and "smelling good." To return to the case of Della Valle, we know that although he was interested mostly in his wife's heart, he also wanted to keep her body whole, following the 1299 bull of Pope Boniface VIII, *Detestande feritatis*, which urged the faithful to conserve a cadaver intact for burial, without eviscerating it, separating parts, or boiling them in order to extract the bones.[6] This procedure was especially used in northern Europe, when entrails were interred close to the site where death had taken place (for example, during crusades), while dry bones, previously boiled in water, were sent to the final destination for proper burial.[7] It was also used, of course, to prepare corpses for the dissecting table.

Royalty often had their body parts separated by embalmers preparing the corpse for lying in state; while the cadaver would be interred in the royal crypt, the heart was usually buried in some other place, and the viscera could even be kept in jars. This practice intriguingly comes to light these days as body parts of the Medici family are discovered in various sites in Tuscany and are reunited by paleopathologists bent on reconstructing not only the lineage's health status but also the occasional scandals that the sudden death of some of them instigated in the past.[8] It is also true that in family vaults bodies could be creatively arranged, if necessary, and indeed many people in the Middle Ages believed that the Emperor Charlemagne was buried sitting on a throne, an idea that may well have influenced Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua's final request in his will of 1612 not to be laid in a wooden coffin ("nullo autem modo in arca lignea") but to be placed sitting on a marble throne with his sword alongside ("sed sedendo cum suo ense apposito super chatedra marmorea ad hoc parata").[9] The duke's body has not yet been found to confirm whether the Gonzaga family dutifully respected his idiosyncratic if narcissistic directives for burial.

This special issue of *JMEMS* addresses different ways of thinking through death and dying in the premodern and early modern period, including different philosophical and legal positions concerning the relationships between the body and its parts, corpses and burial sites, the bodies of saints and the bodies of criminals, the bodies of the dying confessing on their deathbeds and the bodies of suicides choosing to be buried with their souls unprepared. A new frame of knowledge becomes possible when we familiarize ourselves with the face of death, as medical students intently scrutinizing dissected organs and tissues in early modern anatomical theaters knew so well. By looking at the educational, legal, and spiritual valuation of postmortems and autopsies, by studying bequests accommodating family loyalties in drawing up wills, or cadaver stories that center on the manipulation of body parts for the purpose of shocking and inciting ridicule as in gallows humor, we may learn more about the transmission of technical skills and gain a better understanding of the psychology of death and of patronage choices. By reflecting on why separating the holistic corpse of the saint from the disowned carcass of the heretic was so important to medieval people, or why investment in good deeds during life was perceived as preparation for the salvation of the soul, we may better appreciate how the obsession with the "displeasure of death," in the words of the physician Fabio Glissenti (1542?–1615), was accommodated by the living.[10] By examining why confraternities became invested in devising a regime to console the condemned brought to the gallows so that in their last hours they could endure hate, impatience, and despair, or by looking at how people chose to unite cultural practices and art in the representation of a horrific death, as in the cases of infants murdered by their own mothers, we can appreciate in new ways why premoderns composed consolatory poetry and took great measures to contain their dread over the disposal of human remains. By considering how theoreticians argued in the past about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of torture as a means to confirm the science of conjecture or to further the system of legal discovery, and by examining how society fostered models of heroic suicide while condemning self-destructive voluntary death, we can come to a better understanding of the past's valuation of life and of its rites of healing.

The six essays presented in this special issue do not revolt against the prospect of death, do not neglect what in the early modern period was called "the art of living and dying," but perform their own version of the "dance of death" as they reconstruct in multifaceted layers the social and at times the political reality of dying present in an array of medieval and early modern European materials.

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Notes

1 Della Valle later celebrated his wife in his "Funeral Oration on His Wife Maani" (1627), most recently reprinted in Cristiano Spila, " 'Freddo cener ne l'urna, e fiamme al core': Pietro Della Valle e l'orazione funebre," *Studi Secenteschi* 54 (2013): 147–85, at 172–85. See also Remo Giazotto, *Il grande viaggio di Pietro Della Valle, il "Pellegrino" (1612–26): La Turchia, la Persia, l'India con il ritorno a Roma* (Roma: Edizioni Torre d'Orfeo, 1988); and Daria Perocco, *Viaggiare e raccontare. Narrazione di viaggio ed esperienza di racconto tra Cinque e Seicento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1997).

2 Information on the pair is in Giuseppe Favaro, *Gabriele Falloppia modenese (1523–1562): Studio biografico* (Modena: Tip. Immacolata Concezione, 1928). For more on Guilandinus, see Aldo Mieli, *Gli scienziati italiani*, 2 vols. in 4 (Roma: Nardecchia, 1921), vol. 1, pt. 1.

3 The inscription on this tomb now reads (my translation): "Here were buried the bones of Gabriele Falloppio and Melchiorre Guilandino." See Favaro, *Gabriele Falloppio modenese*; and Michele Visentin, "La coppia di fatto del '500," *La Tribuna di Treviso*, Feb. 11, 2007, 45.

4 Andrea Drusini and Maurizio Rippa Bonati, "Le fragili ossa del poeta: Lo studio antropologico dei resti del Petrarca," in *Petrarca, canoni, esemplarità*, ed. Valeria Finucci (Roma: Bulzoni, 2006), 327–46.

5 Ambroise Paré, *The Apologie and Treatises of Ambroise Paré* (1585), ed. G. Keynes (London: Falcon, 1952), 144. As Dannenfeldt explains it, "[O]riginally the *mumia* of the tombs was considered to be the resinous, aromatic exudate which came from the bodies of ancient Egyptians and which received a special virtue because it contained the fluids of the body." Karl Dannenfeldt, "Egyptian Mumia: The Sixteenth Century Experience and Debate," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 2 (1985): 163–80, at 165.

6 For a thorough investigation of Pope Boniface's bull, see Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII and the Division of the Corpse," *Viator* 12 (1981): 221–70.

7 See Katharine Park, "The Life of the Corpse: Division and Dissection in Late Medieval Europe," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 50, no. 1 (1995): 111–32.

8 See, for example, Francesco Mari et al., "The Mysterious Death of Francesco I de' Medici and Bianca Capello: An Arsenic Murder?," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 333, no. 7582 (2006): 1299–1301. On the sacrality of the body of the prince, see Giovanni Ricci, *Il principe e la morte: Corpo, cuore, effigie nel Rinascimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998); and the classic study of Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957).

9 See Ademar of Chabannes, *Ademari Cabannensis Chronicon*, ed. Pascale Bourgain (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 1999), 153–54 (3.31); and more generally, Valeria Finucci, *The Prince's Body: Vincenzo Gonzaga and Renaissance Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

10 Fabio Glissenti, *Discorsi morali contra il dispiacer del morire, detto Anatophilia* (Venice: Domenico Farri, 1596). More generally, see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Vintage, 1981).