Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture
By Louise Noble
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Reviewer: Mary Floyd-Wilson

Louise Noble's *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* is a rich and fascinating study of the early modern investment in the healing power of the human body. Noble's primary focus is corpse pharmacology, the surprisingly commonplace practice of ingesting corporeal matter for therapeutic purposes. Drawing on literary texts and medical writing, Noble reveals a culture preoccupied with the use and status of *mummia,* a drug initially derived from ancient and exotically preserved corpses but later cultivated indiscriminately from the more local dead. Acknowledging that the modern reader may respond with amazement, and perhaps revulsion, to this regular consumption of human body parts, Noble draws a suggestive connection to the modern trafficking of organs for medical transplantation. Our own culture, she suggests, possesses a similar divided consciousness when it comes to the medical deployment of human bodies. Pushing this argument further, Noble contends that corpse medicine defies synchronization by its very nature, for within "pharmacological corpse matter . . . is a temporal lingering that permeates today's medicalized bodies" (5). Certainly corpse medicine disrupts time in its early modern use, for *mummia* was understood to possess a residual life force—some sort of animate remainder derived from fresh or preserved flesh. And once ingested, *mummia* presumably extends the lifespan of the consumer. While Noble addresses the strange temporality of corpse pharmacology in the book's introduction and epilogue, issues of time appear infrequently in the chapters themselves. *Medicinal Cannibalism* is devoted, instead, to analyzing how the period's discourses on cannibalism, corporeal punishment, and the Catholic Eucharist repeatedly intersect with representations of corpse medicine.

For Noble, writers in the period invoke both the strangeness as

well as the normalcy of corpse pharmacology to *mediate* issues that arise in a variety of spheres—religious, political, legal, and colonial—and emerge in a range of genres, including poetry, prose, tragedy, and tragicomedy. Throughout *Medicinal Cannibalism,* "mediation" proves to be an elastic analytical term that allows Noble to move across and connect very different texts and cultural problems. Texts mediate the relation between cannibalism and corpse medicine (60), genres mediate between the medical trade and the cannibalistic implications of that trade (65), the human body mediates between retributive state justice and corpse pharmacology (42), and writers mediate the Protestant challenge to the Catholic Eucharist through an "expression of alimentary desire and cannibalistic language" (125). While the accommodating nature of mediation makes possible surprising connections between and among distinct areas of discourse and knowledge, some readers may wonder if important particularities are obscured by Noble's method. Ultimately, I believe, the ingenuity of her insights warrants the approach.

In the first chapter, "The Mummy Cure," Noble provides background on corpse pharmacology, highlighting its Paracelsian foundations but also outlining how Galen and later Ficino emphasized the human body's extraordinary curative power. The specific history of mummy proves unclear; at some point before the eleventh century it could refer to the "black tar-like substance found in embalmed bodies" or the "embalmed body itself" (20). In its earliest appearances in Europe, mummy often derived from the Middle East. By the early modern period, however, Europeans had begun to manufacture their own mummy, notably at the same time that medical writers claimed that the ideal medicinal corpse should be violently and recently slain. At this juncture, mummy became entangled with the "corporeal leftovers of a brutal judiciary system" (25), for it was the bodies of executed criminals that supplied both the anatomy tables and the medical market. Noble raises, but does not explore, the intriguing question of whether early modern consumers worried about the social status of their mummy: some folks feared that ingesting the blood of a criminal would produce a criminal temperament. Ambroise Paré, the early modern surgeon, expresses "physical repugnance" *not* at the practice of corpse pharmacology but at the ignoble rank of the bodies used. While Noble provides these examples to underscore the ethical problems raised by the early modern state's "assumed proprietary rights over the

bodies of its socially disenfranchised citizens" (27), her work opens up this other potential avenue of inquiry.

In chapter 2, Noble turns her attention to literary works, arguing that in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* the representation of cannibalism as an act of revenge draws its inspiration from the cultural understanding that the "medical corpse market" was "itself underpinned by a philosophy of revenge justice" (34). Recognizing that acts of violence, including cannibalism, are often interpreted and understood to have a therapeutic function for a society, Noble shows how the play undercuts this assumption with its "unproductive, relentless circulation of bodies" (56). As both revenger and cook, Titus's cannibalistic recipe "parodies popular therapeutic prescriptions" (53). Readers may object that forced pedophagy is not equivalent to ingesting dried and processed mummy, but Noble's willingness to draw these parallels gives *Titus Andronicus* a relevance for early modern English culture that few readings of the play achieve.

In chapter three, Noble turns to Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* and John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *The Sea Voyage* to argue that these works explore economic practices through the rhetorical possibilities implicit in the commodified corpse. In other words, the circulation of the human body as a product of trade provided writers in the period with a significant metaphorical resource for critiquing certain economic systems as figuratively cannibalistic. In her actual analysis of *The Unfortunate Traveller,* however, Noble shifts the focus to consider the ethnological and anti-Semitic rhetoric of corpse pharmacology, as well as the strange sexualization of Jack Wilton's fantasy of becoming a medical corpse. Ultimately, Jack's imagined scenario implicates English medical practitioners, undermining the "negative constructions of Jews at the time, showing that Jewishness functions as the grotesque against which notions of Englishness are defined" (78). Fletcher and Massinger's tragicomedy more pointedly depicts the "flesh economy" of Noble's thesis: the playwrights repeatedly contrast an unhealthy, cannibalistic appetite for gold with the physical, authentic value that meat obtains among those shipwrecked and starving. Corpse pharmacology, Noble argues, generates for these authors a "powerful and evocative imagery for exploring the dehumanizing aspects of early modern consumerism" (88).

In her readings of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* in chapter four,

Noble contends that the Protestant denial of the sacrament of the Eucharist produces a residual "hunger for the real flesh and blood of Christ" (90). The medical corpse emerges then as "curious relief for a deprived Protestant appetite that a purely spiritual remedy fails to satisfy" (92). Although this thesis is undeniably provocative, Noble's reading of Spenser's Error episode does not offer any surprises: Spenser represents the Church of Rome as corrupt, monstrous, cannibalistic, and dangerously female in its insatiable appetite. Donne's *Devotions,* on the other hand, exemplifies Noble's thesis. The poet's ambiguity towards the Eucharist raises the possibility that the medical corpse may function as "an alimentary replacement for the body of Christ" (119). Noble persuasively traces a nostalgic desire in Donne's writing for the "nourishing, healing body of Christ in the Eucharist" (123), which gets projected onto the therapeutic power of the medicinal corpse (125).

In the book's final chapter, Noble turns to the cultural construction of female virgin bodies, the *fille vièrge,* as the ideal form of mummy, tracing the appearance of this fantasy in Shakespeare's *Othello* and returning us to Donne and his *Anniversary* poems. (One issue raised by this chapter but not answered by Noble, is how to reconcile the idealization of maiden mummy with Oswald Croll's assertion in the introduction that a young man's blood works best for its "sincere, and gentle, and therefore more excellent" qualities [6].) Prompted by Othello's story of the handkerchief's fabrication—"it was dyed in mummy, which the skillful / Conserved of maidens' hearts"—Noble proposes that Othello's murder of Desdemona satisfies his vision of her body as the "efficacious corpse drug—contained and preserved in purity" (130). To make this argument work, however, she must brush aside the fact that Othello no longer believes his wife to be a virgin (138–39). Noble's discussion also misses opportunities to address the racial implications of corpse pharmacology. Given the handkerchief's Egyptian origins, who were the maidens whose mummified hearts dyed its cloth? Does Othello's racial identity affect an early modern audience's interpretation of his references to balms and drugs? When Othello tells stories of the Anthropophagi (136), does it disrupt Desdemona's construction as mummy to describe her ear as "greedy"? In many ways, Noble's study of corpse pharmacology peaks with her interpretation of Donne's *Anniversaries.* To see Elizabeth Drury as the virginal quintessence of medical *mummia* resonates powerfully with the poem's representation of her death as

strangely regenerative and curative of the world's ailments. Noble further complicates this reading by noting that what Donne's poems "*seek* is the body of Christ as grist for the troubled masculine soul, [but] what the poems *have* is the trace of a dead young virginal woman" (158).

An absorbing and original book, Louise Noble's *Medicinal Cannibalism* demonstrates with ample evidence that early modern Europeans regularly consumed human flesh and that this practice influenced how they understood cannibalism, salvation, nourishment, economic exchanges, virginity, and much more. Readers (with strong stomachs) interested in the history of medicine and embodiment will find plenty here—brace yourself—to chew on.

Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History. (Themes in History.) By Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay Cambridge: Polity, 2011.

Reviewer: James M. Bromley

Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay synthesize an impressive amount of recent historical scholarship and literary criticism on sexuality in their book *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History.* They cast a wide net in search of primary source materials written from the twelfth through nineteenth centuries from all over Europe. This scope helps Phillips and Reay counter a tendency in historical work to isolate periods and national traditions as somehow unique when important relationships and influences exist across temporal and geographic boundaries. The volume is organized into chapters on clerical celibacy and religious understandings of desire, cross-gender erotic relations, eroticism between men and between women, and the circulation of erotic texts. The book ends with an epilogue on colonialism and eroticism that pays special attention to the South Pacific. Although their title gestures toward Michel

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