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Dismemberment in the Medieval and Early Modern English
Imaginary: The Performance of Difference (review)

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War II. Bryon Heffer, reading *The Unnamable* (1958) within the same historical context, employs Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" to interrogate the disintegrating Beckettian body. Heffer adeptly interrogates the ethical dimension of Beckett's aesthetics of "de-creation," remaining critically ambivalent about the ethics of Beckett's art by indicating the resistances it enacts while also arguing that "Beckett's stripping away of the flesh implicates his art in violence rather than removing it to a transcendent standpoint of ethical purity" (56). Heffer seems to suggest that it is this ambiguity that makes Beckett's work so troubling to readers, while potentially demonstrating a powerful critique of political regimes that devalue life.

Overall, this volume provides a welcome intervention into the critical literature by expanding our understanding of the intersections between the Beckettian aesthetic and its politicohistorical contexts. However, some of the chapters fall short in developing our comprehension of the intricacies of a Beckettian politics, for which a critical account remains difficult to navigate despite recent advancements in the field.

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Dismemberment in the Medieval and Early Modern English Imaginary: The Performance of Difference

By Frederika Elizabeth Bain. *Late Tudor and Stuart Drama*. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter / Medieval Institute Publications, 2020; pp. x + 303, 1 illustration. \$115.99 cloth, \$155.99 e-book.

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Dismemberment in the Medieval and Early Modern English Imaginary: The Performance of Difference intercedes in discussions around the estrangement and familiarity of premodern English somatic discursivity. Trafficking in transgeneric literary sketches of corporal fragmentation, Frederika Elizabeth Bain examines how dismemberment, as an extreme form of "bodily alterations," codes or "concretize[s]" categorical distinctions across a spectrum of active agents and passive recipients (2). Bain argues for dismemberment's actionable effects in the premodern imaginary by observing it as a movement between somatic metaphor and physical act, with the two constantly conditioning the production of difference within a variety of technologies defining human status: gender, the animal-human boundary, monstrosity, social class, and religion. Although the study pendulously sways between Elaine Scarry's influential work *The Body in Pain* and Foucault's apparatus of exhibitory sovereign power in *Discipline and Punish*, Bain's focus remains on the deep continuities in acts of bodily partition prevalent in the medieval and early modern periods. With an empathy for the lived experience of the actual bodies in these eras, *Dismemberment* disturbs neat conclusions about fragmentation as

always pejorative and instead adumbrates a persistent “ontological ambiguity” (10) surrounding those who dismember and are dismembered—an ambiguity made less ontologically opaque and more culturally circumstantial by her localized and cross-referential readings of dramas, romances, hagiographies, legends, sermons, travel narratives, cheap print ballads, medical manuals, and woodcuts.

Bain’s analysis stretches across five chapters, each wrestling with fraught interactions between symbolic iterations of dismemberment and its interpersonal reifications. Chapter 1 traces the contours of somatic symbology while solidifying the term “body performance,” which Bain defines as “meaning enacted through the modification, both textual and physical, of the body” (21), as a conceptual schematic through which to interpret forms of corporal fragmentation’s broader sociological significations as England experienced fluctuations in religion and political economy. Through sustained readings of the medieval romance *Eger and Grime*, John Marston’s tragedy *Antonio’s Revenge*, Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (which recurs in each subsequent chapter), and practices of drawing and quartering, Bain reveals how political relations were often displaced onto literary instantiations of physical bodies. However, she also elucidates the obverse: how concrete bodies were used as political instruments on which modifications were enacted either to fashion the self as a social agent or to instruct spectators in proper psychological and political conduct. Chapter 2 parses out acts of bodily partitioning in the cultural formations of gender, and, in tandem with Chapter 3, contains Bain’s most revelatory interpretive contributions. Beginning with a close look at the Levite’s assaulted and murdered wife (*pilegish*, i.e., concubine) in Judges 19 as presented in the thirteenth-century Morgan Crusader Bible, Bain surveys tropes of desexing occurring in acts of rape that make visible sexual violation for a plethora of socially instrumental reasons. She dissects numerous examples of “dismemberments predicated on gender” to underscore how “women’s and men’s dead and divided bodies differ in ways that lead to differing narrative uses” and rhetorical functions (65). Chapter 3 outlines the tensions and semantic slipperiness between the terms “butchery” and “hunting” (129), and determines that specific representations and lexical deployments of each served to animalize or venerate dismemberers in their respective contexts and reify boundaries of human belonging. Bain surmises that vacillations in terminological and imagistic uses vigilantly policed status affiliations, with the metaphorical apparatus of the hunt reserved for representations of fully human and aristocratic entitlements. Chapter 4 argues for the “symbolic valences” (2) of violence as a necessary justification for its practical use in the English construction of legitimacy. In historical chronicles and narratives, unmotivated dismemberment is frequently ascribed to external threats to English geographic and cultural borders (189). This consciousness forms the backdrop for the discursive expansions that judicial executions and dismemberment had to assume to legitimize English differences in the utilization of violence, as Bain’s reading of Cyril Tourneur’s *Atheist’s Tragedy* and the oddly neutral (unlike his repellant continental counterparts) figure of the English executioner “crystalizes the ambivalence concerning retributive violence and dismemberment” (206). The book’s fifth and final chapter tracks the afterlives of dismembered parts and how they were thickly or thinly coded postmortem. Read in relation to Catholic-Protestant debates about resurrection, Bain argues that relic cults, noble mortuary

practices of partition, and the exhibition of criminal body parts used fragments of the individual to open “a possibility-space not available to the whole and untouched individual . . . to perform manifestly understood and imagined realities,” while representations and praxes of re-membering proved to be a much rarer and less impactful symbolic manufacture (239). In sum, Bain finds that the body in parts oftentimes carried more social, didactic, and inspirational potential than the unified corpus.

In the tradition of Mitchell Merbeck’s *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (1998) and Margaret Owens’s *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (2005), Bain’s monograph elaborates upon the worldmaking and sociological possibilities of the open, transected body in modes of spectacular performance. Her title’s major contribution to the existing conversation is an unpacking of the mechanisms and particularities of dismemberment’s performative capacities for crystalizing categorical differences across manifold, ostensibly contradictory, genres. But by concentrating on the continuities in fragmentation’s symbology, Bain sometimes neglects the effective force of historical change, in particular the Reformation, on her subject’s genealogy. Additionally, Chapter 3, which wrestles with animality, could benefit from a protracted engagement with more current critical literature on animal studies and posthumanity.

Despite these very minor limitations, Bain’s book traces precisely dismemberment’s semiotic fortitude for actualizing new social relationality. Her historical depth, accuracy, and ability to prolong specific readings, drawing out their contradictory significations and resonances, are solid. Bain’s text is a thoroughgoing challenge to late modernity’s thoughts about the cultural predominance of wholeness in the medieval and early modern periods, and a valuable delineation of a peculiarly English symbolic praxis from the rest of continental Europe.

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Postdramatic Theatre and Form

Edited by Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish, and Brandon Woolf. Methuen Drama Engage. London: Methuen Drama, 2019; pp. xi + 266. \$115.00 cloth, \$40.95 paper, \$36.85 e-book.

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As its title suggests, the edited collection *Postdramatic Theatre and Form* puts contemporary postdramatic performance in dialogue with formalist considerations. Each chapter speaks directly to Hans-Thies Lehmann’s seminal *Postdramatic Theatre*, making it an excellent companion piece for courses studying Lehmann’s theory. Moreover, individual chapters may potentially complement courses