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Author(s): Giovanna Ferrari
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PUBLIC ANATOMY LESSONS AND THE CARNIVAL: THE ANATOMY THEATRE OF BOLOGNA*

At the beginning of 1638, in the Palazzo dell’Archiginnasio in Bologna, “work began on the erection of the sumptuous and lordly anatomy theatre... one of the most renowned constructions in Italy, the constant amazement of foreigners, and the glory of the city wherein it was built”. Although the theatre was probably already in use by the beginning of 1639, it was repeatedly extended and perfected until 1737. It was in this building, which still stands today — though it had to be completely rebuilt following the bombardment of 29 January 1944 — that for over a century and a half at each carnival the gran fontione of public anatomy was held. This “function” was neither a theoretical anatomy lesson nor a dissection performed by a teacher for his students’ instruction; it was, rather, a complex ceremony:

A medical lector carries out the anatomy of the human body, usually male, which for many days remains on a table in the middle of the theatre, around which the dissectors do their experiments. The professor initiates the discussion among the audience, and then approaches the cadaver to indicate the exhibited parts during his lesson. For fifteen days there is a concourse of medical, philosophical and anatomical lectors, as well as of scholars.

The theatre, especially in the eighteenth century, would be magnificently decorated for the occasion: the walls were hung with damask, candlesticks illuminated the room, and two waxen torches,

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3 A. Barbacci, Monumenti di Bologna: distruzioni e restauri (Bologna, 1977), ad vocem.

4 Sabbatini, “Memorie”. There is no general agreement as to how long the “function” lasted. Probably this varied.
at the head and feet of the cadaver, lit up the dissecting table. The first and last lessons were attended by the most eminent city authorities, representing lay power, papal power and the spiritual church. Notices which, like the lessons themselves, were in Latin were posted on the columns of the Palazzo dell’Archiginnasio, specifying the day and time at which the inaugural lesson was to take place.

Each day, after a general introductory lesson, during the morning and afternoon the professor dealt with a particular subject (an organ or an entire system) which the prior of the scholars and the lectors in the various subjects, in accordance with a fixed order of precedence, had to discuss and about which they had to pose questions. Finally, the anatomy professor “demonstrated” his lesson directly from the cadaver itself, which had sometimes been prepared in advance by the dissector. The courses could range from an average of sixteen to twenty topics treated in as many lessons to the thirty tackled in 1643, and sometimes even more. In the ten to fifteen days that the public anatomy course lasted, the whole human body was examined and briefly described. Meanwhile, in a nearby chapel, and at the expense of the anatomy professor, masses were said for the souls of those dissected.

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5 The decoration of the theatre is described in B.U.L., MS. 80, Scritture attinenti allo Studio di Bologna, “Ad instructionem D. D. Scholarium, aliorumque quibus contigerit in publico Archigymnasio habere actiones”, fo. 331r-v. See also B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Diversorum, Fondi e Spese, “Nota delle spese che si fanno in occasione della Pubblica Anatomià”.

6 G. F. Guglielmini, De claris Bononiae anatomicis: oratio (Bologna, 1737), p. 29; B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Diversorum, i, no. 2, Annotomia publica, file 2, “Metodo, che si è tenuto per l’addietro dall’anatomico, prima di cominciare la Notomia”. The legate might suddenly decide to attend the “function”, as in 1679: B.U.L., MS. 770, A. F. Ghiselli, “Memorie antiche manuscritte”, xxxix, pp. 76-7. See also relevant information contained in B.S.A., Archivio dello Studio (hereafter Studio), Università degli scolari artisti, Atti, at the dates at which the public anatomy lessons were held.

7 The notices to the public were prescribed by the Philosophiae ac Medicinae Scholarium Bononiensis Gymnasia Statuta (Bologna, 1612), p. 28.

8 In this connection, see B.U.L., MS. 80, Scritture, “In causa di precedenze”, fos. 338r-69v; B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Annotomia publica, file 9, “Elenchi di argomentanti”.

9 The post of permanent dissector was not created until 1697, though the practice in question was probably already well established by this date: Guglielmini, De claris Bononiae anatomicis, p. 25; also since the assistance of the anatomy professor’s “coadiutores” was provided for from the end of the sixteenth century onwards (see Section III below, on the 1586 decree). None the less, anatomy professors, especially those who had a surgical training, often did their own dissecting.

10 B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Serte di annue lezioni, folder I, fos. 340, 342; B.S.A., Studio, Università degli scolari artisti, Recapiti of the Atti, loose papers, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

11 See Bologna Archiepiscopal Archives, Sacra scuola di Conforteria di S. Maria della Morte, K 506, cxix, “Libro de iustitiati”, passim: to obtain the body, the anatomy (cont. on p. 52)
At the end of his description the chronicler adds: “This is mostly done at carnival time, being the season best suited to conserve the cadavers, and also in order to enable the maskers to participate”.\(^{12}\) This statement was confirmed by an eighteenth-century scholar who, in a letter addressed to a Dutch correspondent, full of praise for the Bolognese Studium, explained that public anatomy existed “so that Bologna does not lack its useful shows (utilia spectacula) which are attended by many people (frequens populus) and by the curious licence of masked people (curiosa personatorum licentia)”.\(^{13}\)

I

Public anatomy, as we shall see, was not a purely Bolognese phenomenon: there are examples of it in numerous other Italian and European cities, universities and distinguished medical colleges. The ceremonial features of the Bolognese “public function” and its lengthy survival are, however, unique and distinctive, as well as being intimately related to the structure and historical development of Bologna’s internationally renowned Studium. Furthermore, since no comparative studies have yet been undertaken on public anatomies, I think it is worth seeking answers to the various questions that the Bolognese case poses: in addition, some of these have to do with characteristics common to public anatomy in general.

First of all, what demands could have prompted such a performance? What was the meaning of the ceremonial aspect, and why was so much attention — and money — lavished on the theatre itself? And who took part or even simply attended? Secondly, if carnival and public anatomy really did overlap, if we want to grasp its significance we must know where and when this happened, and — if possible — who was responsible, and why this overlap occurred.

This article will therefore first of all provide a brief outline of the institutional history of public anatomy in Bologna\(^ {14}\) in an attempt to pinpoint those demands and interests that shaped it and determined its final characteristic form as it appears in the notes made during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on which my initial description

\(^{(n.~11~cont.)}\)

professor gave the chaplain of the fraternity a sum of money for these masses, and if he refused this sum the professor would not be granted the cadaver (1643).

\(^{12}\) Sabbatini, “Memorie”.

\(^{13}\) Gaspare Mariano de Varrano Lenzi, *Responsum viro Batavo circa ea quae Bononiae de studiis notabili sunt* (Bologna, 1719), p. 5.

\(^{14}\) The authority on this subject is still G. Martinotti, *L’insegnamento dell’anatomia a Bologna prima del secolo xix* (Bologna, 1911).
has drawn. Other interpretations of the phenomenon may suggest themselves if I leave to one side the internal history of this particular institution and instead attempt to trace fragments of that context — or of those contexts — in which the event itself as well as the tradition of public anatomy had both function and meaning.

II

The teaching of human anatomy through dissection is unanimously thought to originate in Bologna itself at the beginning of the fourteenth century, around the figure of Mondino, in response to the requirements of university life and to the need to train future doctors and surgeons.\footnote{See A. Castiglioni, Storia della medicina (Milan, 1936), pp. 295-9; C. Singer, A Short History of Anatomy and Physiology from the Greeks to Harvey (New York, 1957), pp. 75 ff.; see also H. B. Adelmann, “The Studium of Bologna”, in his Marcello Malpighi and the Evolution of Embryology, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1966), i, pp. 72 ff.} During the previous century the main surgeons of the Bolognese school, such as Guglielmo da Saliceto and Bartolomeo da Varignana, as well as many others practising in the north of Italy, performed dissections either on people who had died from disease or in order to ascertain the causes of their death.\footnote{La chirurgia italiana nell'alto Medioevo, ed. Mario Tabanelli, 2 vols. (Florence, 1965), ii, esp. pp. 742-50 on Guglielmo da Saliceto; E. Coturri, L'insegnamento dell'anatomia nelle università medioevali (ninth international conference, “Università e società nei secoli xii-xvi”, Pistoia, 1982), pp. 131-43.} The miniatures and engravings of medical and surgical subjects which depict a small group of persons dressed in togas or in doctoral garments standing around the dissecting table\footnote{Coturri, Insegnamento dell'anatomia nelle università medioevali; the first engraving on this subject is contained in B. Anglicus, De proprietatibus rerum (Lyons, 1482).} appear to portray this kind of practice, similar to a present-day autopsy. The fourteenth-century university anatomy lesson differed from the post-mortem both in its approach and in its aims, but unfortunately no satisfactory images of it have survived: all we have are much later stereotyped images that portray the teacher at his cathedra (professorial pulpit), despite the fact that Mondino explicitly states that he “anatomized” (anathomizavi).\footnote{See C. Singer, “The Confluence of Humanism, Anatomy and Art”, in D. J. Gordon (ed.), Fritz Saxl, 1890-1948: A Volume of Memorial Essays (London, 1957), pp. 265-6. Mondino's phrase is in the “De anatomia matricis” chapter of his Anathomia, 1st edn. (Pavia, 1478).}

The oldest University of Bologna statutes relating to the university of arts that have survived (1405), at rubric LXXXVI, “De anothomia quolibet anno fienda”, stipulate the regulations relating to dissec-
tions. The rector of the university of scholars (Università degli scolari) granted the necessary permit to the students or directly to the “doctor” they had designated to perform the anatomy, without imposing any chronological limits. The main issue that the statute sought to settle had to do with the “rows and disorders that arose in the search for bodies”. To avoid incidents, the only rule adopted — apart from the obligation to publicize dissections, which made it possible to keep a check on how many occurred — set the maximum number of male and female anatomies (two and one respectively) that students could attend during the entire course of their studies. It was up to the doctor to procure the cadavers, the price of which, however, could not exceed a fixed sum to be paid by the students. The only hint of solemnity in the proceedings consisted in the (optional) attendance of the rector accompanied by a “friend” whom he was free to appoint. Otherwise, the lesson was attended by students only: twenty of them or, when the subject was a woman, thirty; mostly chosen from among the foreign scholars. As the title of the rubric itself states, the proceedings constituted a lesson, albeit of a rather particular type, and not a public ceremony.

All the features of these earliest public anatomy lessons were later modified. In 1442 a reform to the statutes affected the way in which cadavers for dissection were supplied. This was an issue which the earliest statutes had obviously not been able to resolve. From this date on, the podestà or other authority acting on his behalf was, upon the request of the rector, obliged to supply the students with two subjects per year for the purposes of anatomical examination. It was of no importance how the bodies might be found, but they had to come from places at least thirty miles away from Bologna. As far as the university of scholars was concerned, this arrangement meant a slight loss in independence in exchange for the guarantee that they would be able to perform two dissections a year. That the

20 Anatomical dissections were probably classed as “extraordinary” lessons, and as such would be held at times when “ordinary” lessons were suspended. On the imprecise distinction between ordinary and extraordinary lessons, see L. Simeoni and A. Sorbelli, Storia dell’Università di Bologna, 2 vols. (Bologna, 1940), i, pp. 86-7, 213-15.
21 The trial of Maestro Alberto de’ Zancari is famous. As doctor at the Studium, in 1319 he performed the anatomy of a body that had been secretly disinterred by his scholars: O. Mazzoni Toselli, Racconti storici estratti dall’Archivio criminale di Bologna, 2 vols. (Bologna, 1870), ii, pp. 114-25.
22 Statuti, Riforme promulgated in 1442, rubric 19, p. 318.
cadavers had to come from areas situated at a certain minimum distance from the city is an interesting fact which I shall consider below.  

No particular attention was paid to the place where these lessons were held and, given that the university schools did not acquire their own seats until the sixteenth century, they probably had no special or fixed venue.

During the fifteenth century dissection for educational purposes spread to the main universities of Europe and, above all towards the end of the century, it assumed new objectives which transformed it from a lesson that was exclusively devoted to the training of a class of doctors into a spectacle attracting a broad spectrum of scholars and artists. Anatomy seemed a precious instrument that could be used to investigate man, and with man nature. This surge in interest was sustained by the increasing availability of books on anatomy — with ever more sophisticated illustrations, designed also to be of use to artists. This development had been made possible by the advent of printing and the development of engraving techniques. Between the anatomist and the painter/drawer, there soon arose a collaborative

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23 All the university statutes that I have examined contain similar rules. For Genoa, see P. L. Isnardi, *Storia dell'Università di Genova*, 2 vols. (Genoa, 1861-7), i, pp. 329-30; for Perugia, see G. Ermini, *Storia dell'Università di Perugia* (Bologna, 1947), p. 153; for Pisa, see A. Corsini, *Andrea Vesalio nello Studio di Pisa* (Siena, 1915), p. 17 n. 2; for Florence, see the Statuti della Università e Studio fiorentino, ed. A. Gherardi (Florence, 1881), p. 74; for Padua, see the ancient Statuta, et privilegia almae Universitatis DD. Philos. Medic. ac Theolog. um Cognomento Artistarum Archigymnasti Patavini, published with the related reforms (Padua, 1648), p. 91.

24 The schools began to gravitate towards the area in which the Archiginnasio was later built at the start of the sixteenth century: G. Guidicini, *Cose notabili della città di Bologna*, 6 vols. (Bologna, 1868-73), iii, p. 313. Earlier the schools had been spread out over an entire quarter: G. Zaccagnini, *Storia dello Studio di Bologna durante il Rinascimento* (Geneva, 1930), p. 194.


26 See the late humanist position of the Paduan Niccolietto Vernia in E. Garin (ed.), *La disputa delle arti nel Quattrocento* (Florence, 1947), p. 148. On the stimulus given to printing and engraving by anatomy, see Singer, “Confluence of Humanism, Anatomy and Art”, pp. 266-8. See J. Barigazzi (Berengario da Carpi), *Commentaria ... super Anatomia Mundini* (Bologna, 1521), with engravings depicting human bodies which “etiam juvant pictores”.
rapport which remained necessary right up to the present day. In his anatomical manuscripts Leonardo da Vinci provided a very vivid depiction of this relationship:

you, who wish with words to demonstrate the figure of man with all the aspects of his bodily parts, must renounce that opinion, because the more minutely you describe your object, the more you will confound the mind of the reader, and the more impossible will you render knowledge of the thing described. It is therefore necessary both to depict and to describe.27

Furthermore, from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, many artists, mostly Italian, either took a close interest in or themselves carried out anatomical investigations of human bodies in order to discover the proportions and form of the muscles.28 At the same time, the social position of anatomists underwent a sharp improvement, which culminated during the following century. This occurred even though the scorn with which anatomy — a partly “mechanical” art — was viewed, and the opposition of the corporation of doctors to surgeons (and perhaps also the old infamy arising from their contact with blood), continued to appear from time to time in Italy, and abroad retained considerable influence.29

Alessandro Benedetti, an erudite and famous doctor of his time, has left, in his Anatomice, an interesting firsthand account of this particular phase. His book, which is a treatise on anatomy (rather than a guide), had a considerable success and was reprinted several times in a variety of European countries at the beginning of the


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sixteenth century. W. S. Heckscher, in a very important work on Rembrandt's Anatomy of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp, has already identified in Benedetti's work the earliest formulation of the rules governing the new practice of public anatomy, which appears as a thoroughgoing ceremony. It is worth paying close attention to several points here that are particularly relevant to public anatomy as it developed in Bologna.

First of all, Benedetti dedicates his treatise to the emperor, Maximilian I, who is invited to observe the parts of the body prepared for the demonstrations, leaving aside the phase of mere dissection, "a horrifying task, an object worthy of a special theatrical presentation" (horrido munere . . . materia suo theatrali digna spectaculo). Despite the ambiguous present historic tense employed by the anatomist, we know that he in fact performed public dissections at the medical college in Venice. Indeed in the case of the examination of the venter inferior (the organs of digestion and reproduction), the invitation contained in the Anatomice seems to have been to an actual event. Maximilian, along with several renowned and erudite Venetians, was called upon to attend for a specific reason: "inasmuch as I know you all to be men who are very moderate in eating and drinking, and knowing that you often discuss the intemperance of the belly (ventris importunitatem) and that you are upright and strict in overcoming it". In the preface to each chapter — that is, at each stage of the dissection — Benedetti would address actual living people, to whom he would recommend the consideration of a particular part of the body that he felt was of relevance to the interests of the guests. For example, he invited the celebrated humanist Ermolao Barbaro and the philosopher Antonio Corner to attend his exposition of the skull, "because they always and with passion cultivate the mind". To his examination of the heart he invited a number of cultured Venetian senators, including the father of Pietro Bembo, Bernardo, a literary personage of Neoplatonic views. Benedetti's own uncle Angelo, himself an anatomist and very probably in contact with Leonardo da

32 I am quoting from the 1527 Cologne edition of Benedetti's Anatomice, fo. Ciir-v, praefatio ad amicos.
Vinci, was invited to attend his explanation of the venous, bone, muscular and nervous systems, as was the historian Marino Sanudo and others.\textsuperscript{33} Every well-educated citizen therefore had a ready-made and high-minded reason for taking part in public anatomy sessions during which "the mysterious profundities of nature" were revealed.\textsuperscript{34} The anatomist presented himself as the depository of the secrets of the microcosm, and the possessor of an intellectual form of knowledge rather than of a practical and therapeutic one. The original didactic purpose of the anatomical investigations now seemed almost irrelevant: the anatomist anxiously awaited the moment when the "important youth" would depart, thus enabling him to devote himself to deeper reflection in the company of his learned friends.\textsuperscript{35} Judging by Benedetti's own account, public anatomy might be characterized as a party thrown by an up-and-coming professional figure as a means of self-promotion, aimed at a very mixed and eclectic community of Renaissance scholars.\textsuperscript{36} Given that there is nothing in nature that is not worthy of admiration, as Benedetti states in the \textit{praefatio} to chapter 2, these scholars would be sure to appreciate a similar spectacle. In book 1 of his work, Benedetti even provides detailed instructions on how public anatomy should be organized. Since anatomists were not permitted to dissect the living, they had to make do with the corpses of criminals \textit{clementius}. He also indicated the requisites of these subjects: they had to come from distant regions and from the lower social orders. Particularly sought after were the

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, bk. 4, fos. Hiv\textsuperscript{v}, Hv\textsuperscript{v}. The great philologist and patriarch of Aquileia, Ermolao Barbaro, died in Rome in 1493. Antonio Corner (Cornelius), although certainly less well known, probably enjoyed a certain degree of fame in his lifetime as a philosopher: he taught at the Paduan Studium, and G. Alberici, \textit{Catalogo breve degli illustri et famosi scrittori venetiani} (Bologna, 1605), p. 10, refers to him as an "exceptional poet, a man of the most honourable qualities, much-lettered". As regards the text of the \textit{Anatomice}, and Alessandro Benedetti and his anatomical examinations, see Lind, \textit{Studies in Pre-Vesalian Anatomy}, pp. 67-137; on the Venetian anatomical investigations of Benedetti, see F. Bernardi, \textit{Prospetto storico-critico dell'origine, facoltà ... del Collegio medico-chirurgico, e dell'arte chirurgica in Venezia} (Venice, 1797), pp. 54 ff.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, bk. 1, fo. Aii\textsuperscript{v}.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, bk. 5, fo. Lii\textsuperscript{v}.

\textsuperscript{36} "Haec [public anatomy] si exquisita est, vere nobilitat medicum & chirurgum" was the comment made by F. Hoffmann, as rector of the University of Halle in Germany, on B. B. Petermann, \textit{Theses inaugurales medico-forenses de Anatomia publica} (Halle, 1703), fo. D4\textsuperscript{v}; see also G. Panseri, "Medicina e scienza naturali nei secoli xvi e xvii", in \textit{Storia d'Italia Einaudi, annali 3: scienza e tecnica} (Turin, 1980), esp. pp. 343-9. On the composition and interests of the Renaissance élite, see L. Thorndike, \textit{A History of Magic and Experimental Science}, 6 vols. (New York, 1958-9), v, pp. 7-8.
corpses of people who had been hanged, especially if they were middle-aged, neither fat nor thin, and of larger overall stature than average, "so that there is material that is in greater abundance and more evident for the spectators". Here again, as in the university statutes, there were geographical and social limits that determined whether or not a corpse might become a cadaver for dissection. Such criteria had the declared purpose of minimizing the risk of reaction from *propinquorum.*

The predilection, as subjects for public anatomy, for the corpses of people who had been executed, is a very intricate topic, which merits a brief digression. The birth of anatomic teaching and enquiry — or its rebirth, if one takes the Hellenistic age as one’s point of departure — gave rise to a dense web of practical and political issues, of which the most thorny related to the way in which subjects for dissection were to be found. Kings and sovereigns in general, thus even popes, formed an alliance with the new scholars. This alliance guaranteed at one and the same time close control over whatever social tension might be created by the anatomists’ requirements, the proper performance of university teaching, which was always followed with interest by the sovereigns, and lastly the protection of the anatomists themselves.

The anatomical celebration that Benedetti put on for Emperor Maximilian actually served to cap a privileged relationship that had taken shape between the two sides from the fourteenth century onwards, and to which all the most ancient university statutes bear witness. The preference for the corpses of people who had been hanged may be best accounted for by the following consideration: such bodies combined physical characteristics (they were generally young or middle-aged and in good conditions of health) that were attractive to anatomists with the fact that sovereigns, from Alexand-

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37 Benedetti, *Anatomice*, bk. 1, fo. Ci, “Ad resectionem igitur ignobiles, ignoti, ex longinquis regionibus, sine vicinitatis iniuria, propinquorumque nota, iure dumtaxat peti possunt”.

rine times onwards, could dispose of them from the moment of conviction precisely as they saw fit, even prior to execution.\(^{39}\) This was a fully fledged right: in the view of Benedetti, the bodies of the condemned “were available within the limits laid down by the law”, and even two hundred and fifty years later Cardinal Lambertini (later the enlightened Pope Benedict XIV) expressed the opinion that this right drew its justification “from the dominion that the prince possesses over the bodies of the condemned”.\(^{40}\) With greater precision, B. B. Petermann wrote in 1703 that the supreme authority “has the right in life and in death and hence also the power either to leave the cadaver unburied or to bestow it for anatomy”.\(^{41}\) It was apparently a custom which the local subaltern population accepted, at least in Italy where there are no records of any such sensational revolts against the surgeons and anatomists of condemned prisoners as occurred, especially in the eighteenth century, in France and England.\(^{42}\) At most, resistance occurred, as in Bologna, for example, when university students sought to take possession of the corpses of people who had died an accidental or natural death.\(^{43}\) On these occasions the parish priests, anxious to defend their rights of jurisdiction, joined in the protest. There are many factors that might account for this contrast in local reactions. In Italy too, as we shall see later,

\(^{39}\) This was practised in France, as a surgical experiment, on people who had kidney-stones: A. Portal, *Histoire de l’anatomie et de la chirurgie*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1770-9), i, preface, p. xxiv; this also mentions the Hellenistic tradition. Falloppio, in Pisa, may have carried out toxicological experiments on those condemned to death: Martinotti, *Insegnamento dell’anatomia*, p. 103 n. 3.


\(^{41}\) Petermann, *Theses inaugurales*, fo. A4*, “ius vitae necisque et ita etiam potestatem aut inhumandum relinquendae cadaver, aut anatomiae concedenda habet”. The death sentence seriously diminished the legal status of the subject who, becoming a *servus poenae*, was deprived of the fundamental individual right to make a will: see S. Guazzini, *Tractatus ad defensam inquisitorum, carceratorum, reorum et condemnatorum super quocumque crimine* (Rome, 1664), pp. 292-3.


\(^{43}\) Apart from the case referred to below, Section VI, which took place in 1681, other cases are mentioned in L. Frati, *La vita privata di Bologna dal secolo xiii al xviii* (Bologna, 1928), p. 97; and yet others in *Raccolta di alcune notificazioni*, iii, pp. 266-7.
there was certainly a general feeling of discomfort about dissection. However, the carefully tried and tested way of organizing public anatomy sessions, the early recourse to the bodies of people who died in hospital, the relatively slow and orderly growth in the demands made by Italian anatomists, as compared to the sudden mushrooming and rapid expansion of foreign colleges, evidently helped to preserve a balance between the various different interests.

Returning our attention to the *Anatomice*, Benedetti proceeds in his apology for dissection by supplying precise indications as to the time and place most suitable for the performance of anatomical investigations. Lessons, he states, should be held at the coldest time of year, so that the bodies can be kept over a long period, in a large and well-ventilated room. Inside this room, Benedetti recommends the construction of a “temporary theatre . . . with seats arranged in a circle, of the kind that are seen in Rome or Verona”, large enough to hold the spectators, while leaving plenty of room for the dissectors to move around. The cadaver was to be placed on a high well-lit table in the centre of the room. The seating arrangement of the audience is not left to chance: “the seats must be allocated according to rank” (*sedendi ordo pro dignitate distribuendus est*), and this task is entrusted to a *praefectus*. The *custodes*, on the other hand, have the job of keeping the *importunam plebem* away, while two *quaestores* collect money to cover the necessary expenses.44

The suggestions made by Benedetti form the basis on which the organizational and ceremonial structure of public anatomy developed, from Bologna and Padua to Uppsala, over a period of three centuries. Some of these suggestions provided a confirmation of practices that had already taken root and become widespread. Others introduced decisive innovations, in particular the idea of the anatomy theatre and the introduction into the organization of the lesson of particularly solemn features.

The influence of Benedetti’s remarks on the organization of public anatomy in Bologna is immediately perceptible, even if it should not be forgotten that in this particular city the needs of the Studium scholars, to whom this form of teaching was principally addressed, took precedence. Berengario da Carpi, lector in surgery at the Studium from 1502 until 1527, relates in his *Commentaria* (1521) that he had displayed the placenta of a woman who had been executed “before almost five hundred students of our University of Bologna

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and also many citizens". Berengario himself insisted on the need for and the inherent interest of anatomical knowledge both for doctors who want to know what they are doing when they treat their patients and for the "philosopher who investigates the secrets of nature". From a letter written in January 1523 by the preceptor of Ercole Gonzaga — who at that time was a student in Bologna — mentioning that a public anatomy session was about to commence, we know that such occasions were at that time still rare and that accordingly all the "artistic" students — that is to say, those attending the faculty of medicine and arts — would rush *en masse* to take part. Ercole himself and his cousin "Monsignor Pirro Gonzaga", who had been present on other occasions, intended to go to subsequent lessons, even though they were actually engaged in literary studies. To accommodate the crowd of people who wished to attend, the rooms illustrated in the contemporary engravings (see Plate 1) can certainly not have been large enough, and special wooden structures were presumably erected for the occasion.

In 1540 this solution was certainly adopted for a series of lessons/dissections which Andreas Vesalius also attended, as we learn from the diary of a German student, Baldasar Heseler: "the anatomy lesson had been organized . . . quite well and conveniently . . . There was a table on which the subject lay, and around it four rows of seats constructed in a circle, so that almost two hundred people could see". Vesalius, who was already famous, had been requested by the scholars to come to Bologna as an anatomist (at that time he taught at Padua). His dissections were eagerly awaited — especially by the German nation — and the necessary arrangements were made with great care. The theatre, which Vesalius himself termed "elegant", was three-quarters full of students. There were also fifty or so *Curtianis* — that is, doctors and other learned people who

45 Berengario da Carpi, *Commentaria*, fo. 222v. Berengario specifies on several occasions that it was a public not a private anatomy lesson. On this surgeon, see V. Putti, *Berengario da Carpi* (Bologna, 1937).
48 L. Münster, "Le vedute di Andrea Vesalio sull'anatomia galenica e sul galenismo, espresse in occasione della sua prima 'notomia' pubblica a Bologna", *Atti della IV Biennale della Marca e dello Studio Firmano per gli storici dell'arte medica* (Fermo, 1961).
49 The diary was found and published by R. Eriksson, *Andrea Vesalius' First Public Anatomy at Bologna, 1540* (Uppsala, 1959); the passage cited is on p. 85.
50 Münster, "Vedute di Andrea Vesalio", p. 159.
1. Engraving from frontispiece of J. Barigazzi (Berengario da Carpi), *Anatomia Carpi: Isagogae breves* (Bologna, 1523)
*(Photo: by courtesy of the Bologna University Library)*
upheld the Galenic theses faithfully propounded by Matteo Corti, the lector whose job it was to perform the anatomical demonstration, while Vesalius undertook the dissection. The rector of the scholars also attended. One might say that the public anatomy lesson had been organized “with all possible ceremonies and means”, which included an abundant supply of subjects for dissection: the corpses of three people who had been executed and six live dogs. Doubtless the students and Corti and Vesalius must have applied pressure on the court authorities to this end. Indeed Corti opened the sessions by saying “our subject for the anatomy lesson has been hanged”. After five days, Vesalius informed the scholars, “tomorrow we shall have a new subject; I believe they will hang another: indeed this cadaver is now dry and wrinkled”.

As may be gathered from Heseler’s diary, the atmosphere reigning at this public anatomy lesson was as vivacious as the scene depicted on the title-page of De humani corporis fabrica (1543): a throng of spectators around the dissecting table, engaged in lively discussion, students jostling one another in an attempt to touch the organs prepared by the dissector. (See Plate 2.) The public anatomy session that took place in 1544 was probably even more chaotic — and also less educational. Francesco Pozzi recounts an extremely heated dispute, which Vesalius avoided taking part in. Rival groups of supporters loudly incited their champions (all of whom were eminent personalities at the Studium, philosophers and doctors, etc.) to express their views on several crucial points of Galenic theory (the role of the liver and the heart in the formation of blood). Pozzi does not describe the place where this dispute occurred, but it is reasonable to infer from the seating arrangement of the spectators that it was similar to a theatre.

In what ways did public anatomy change during the period of more than a hundred years between the 1405 statutes and Vesalius’ examinations? The number of spectators had certainly increased, and their reasons for attending had become more sophisticated. No longer was the audience composed of only twenty or thirty medical students, plus an assortment of ordinary townspeople and scholars interested in anatomy. And, almost imperceptibly, the time of year at which

52 The expression is taken from a letter that has to do with another public anatomy, put on in Pisa for Vesalius in 1544: Corsini, Andrea Vesalio, p. 5.
54 Ibid., p. 162.
55 F. Pozzi, Apologia in anatome pro Galeno, contra Andream Vessalium Bruxellensem (Venice, 1562), pp. 117-36.
2. Frontispiece of A. Vesalius, De humani corporis fabrica (Basle, 1555)  
(Photo: by courtesy of the Bologna University Library)
the public dissections took place also changed: in 1523, 1540 and 1544 they were held in January, during the carnival period.\(^5\) Although the statutes drawn up in the fifteenth century did not provide explicitly for this, it had become common practice for the students to have holidays during the carnival. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Vice-legate Averoldi intervened to limit students’ carnival holidays to a period of two weeks prior to Ash Wednesday.\(^5\) The decision-making, financial and organizational power of the scholars had, however, remained unchanged. Indeed, in 1540, fully aware of what they were doing and probably in eager anticipation of the inevitable clash, they chose to bring together two such contrasting figures as Matteo Corti, the well-established Galenist, and the combative young Vesalius.

III

As far as the management of the Bolognese Studium was concerned, the period of papal government that stretched from the last years of the Council of Trent until the end of the century was markedly reformist in character, leading to an increase in control and a reordering of university life.\(^5\) In accordance with the wishes of Vice-legate Pietro Donato Cesi and Pope Pius IV, but against a background of controversy and opposition from the senate, the Palazzo delle Scuole was constructed between 1562 and 1563.\(^6\) This building brought all university teaching activities under the same roof for the first time. During the same period public anatomy was also the object of new statutory regulation, which seemed to be dictated above all by the desire to guarantee that “public anatomy be held every year”. If the rector or, in his absence, the prior of the scholars failed to ensure that the dissections took place, he would be fined. For their part, the “superiors” undertook to supply the anatomists even with subjects born within the territory of Bologna, “providing they are not honoured citizens”.\(^6\)

The university career of Giulio Cesare Aranzio, “anatomist and surgeon” as he defined himself, began at this time. Aranzio was an

\(^6\) B.S.A., Assunzione di Studio, Leggi e decreti sull’Studio, folder 1.
\(^8\) See P. Prodi, Il sovrano pontefice (Bologna, 1982), esp. ch. 7.
3. Engraving inserted in Plautus, *Comoediae XX* (Venice, 1511)

*(Photo: by courtesy of the Bologna University Library)*
outspoken champion of his own professional worth, as well as of the importance of public anatomy.\textsuperscript{61} Ten years after Aranzio's first request to this effect, the teaching of anatomy was separated from that of surgery, with the creation of an autonomous and permanent chair (1570). In a memorial that he later (1586) wrote to the Assunteria di Studio (a senate committee that oversaw the running of the university), Aranzio revealed the background behind the affair: he had consented to continue performing anatomies, which he had given up owing to some unpleasantness with the scholars:

on the condition, that I should no longer depend in any way on the scholars, but should recognize as patrons only the distinguished senators; it was therefore concluded that I should be inscribed in the roll of anatomy, and thus insured, and freed from the election of the scholars.\textsuperscript{62}

Accordingly, as laid down in the decree of 1570, “the doctor-surgeon assigned in the roll to anatomy teaching, as well as any other doctor-surgeon, is prohibited from performing public anatomy unless the first term (tertiaria) is finished, and during the period of carnival holidays”. Under this decree, the period set aside for public anatomy included both the Christmas and the carnival holidays. However, in 1579 the senate restricted it further. It was decided that Aranzio would begin his lessons at the beginning of January, that is, at the start of the carnival holiday period. Once the anatomy professor had finished, if other cadavers were available, first Tagliacozzi and then other doctor-surgeons, following the order of their doctoral seniority, were entitled to perform public anatomies, “but not during the same period in which the anatomy professor would perform his”.\textsuperscript{63}

With the introduction of these provisions, a new situation began to take shape. The anatomist, the last elected teacher, had broken free from the authority of the scholars to submit directly to that of the politicians. The main anatomy lesson, performed annually by the lector inscribed in the roll, had to take place in January. For this...
occasion, in accordance with the statutes, two corpses were provided. If there were more corpses than required, other public anatomies could be performed, after the full anatomy professor had finished, providing this was done within the carnival period.

However, the provisions of the decree clashed with the fact that, as well as Aranzio, there were two other great anatomists working in Bologna at that time: Costanzo Varolio and Gasparo Tagliacozzi. Naturally, it was not easy to find enough corpses — or time to examine them — during the brief period between the beginning of January and the end of the carnival. It must have been a very bitter conflict, and the decree was disregarded on several occasions in order to enable Varolio and Tagliacozzi to perform dissections outside the carnival period. None the less, during the twenty years or so that Aranzio was full professor of anatomy, the anatomy course came increasingly to revolve around a single annual public dissection performed by the full anatomy professor himself. This was not so much because of the need to comply with the spirit of the decree: it was more an outcome of Aranzio’s own attitude. Indeed from his privileged position as full professor of anatomy, Aranzio tended to seize all the available cadavers for himself.

The scholars also found Aranzio’s behaviour extremely annoying, and complained about it in a letter that they sent to the senate in 1586. In their view, the “honour of the university and the splendour of the Studium” had been placed in jeopardy by Aranzio’s conduct, “since, over the last two years, the anatomist has performed his dissections in the schools, without their order, participation or knowledge, contrary to the observed custom of these many years, and in express contradiction of the statutes and decorum of the said university”. The settlement of this dispute was entrusted once again to a legatine decree, issued by Cardinal Salviati in 1586.

64 For Varolio and Tagliacozzi, see Mazzetti, Repertorio di tutti i professori, under their names; on Varolio, see also Fantuzzi, Scrittori bolognesi, viii, ad vocem; on Tagliacozzi, see the very interesting study by M. Teach-Gnudi and G. B. Webster, The Life and Times of Gaspare Tagliacozzo, Surgeon of Bologna, 1545-99 (Milan and New York, 1950). On relations between Aranzio and Tagliacozzi, see G. A. Gentili, “Un ulteriore documento inedito riguardante il Tagliacozzo e l’anatomia”, Rivista di storia delle scienze mediche e naturali, xxxii (1952), pp. 352-6. On the bad relations between Varolio and Aranzio, see Martinotti, Insegnamento dell’anatomia, p. 33 and n. Varolio obtained also an exemption from the decree of 1570: B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Annotomia publica, file 2, decree promulgated by L. Lattanzi.


The stated aim of the decree was to “prevent the disorders occasioned by the anatomy, and to ensure in future that it may be followed with the proper calm and usefulness to those attending in order to learn”, and “so that it may be heard and seen with due decency (modestia)”. It provided for the appointment by the university of four particularly sober scholars, whose task would be:

- to stand at the door of the theatre when there is an anatomy lesson, and to allow and refuse entrance as they see fit, in order that the theatre accommodate only doctors, scholars and other persons of good quality, who enter therein so that they may hear and learn, and not create an uproar, as sometimes occurs, with the prohibition of payment for entrance made by scholars to whomsoever.

The decree promulgated in 1586 also ruled that the cost of building the theatre was no longer to be charged to the students, but rather to the professor of anatomy himself. Inside the theatre, the prior of the scholars was to occupy a seat close to the professor, and the prior’s first counsellor was to be seated near to him, “with the others following according to the degrees of their precedence, all seated in the places specially prepared”. During the lessons, the anatomy professor would have to reply to the questions put to him by the scholars’ representatives and by the other people present. During the dissection of the cadaver, he could avail himself of assistants.

It is quite apparent from what the decree prescribes and prohibits that the anatomy lessons generally took place amid anything but the calm and modestia that is several times invoked. The suggestions made earlier by Benedetti are re-echoed: the checking of spectators at the entrance, the collaboration of the disectors, the sedendi ordo pro dignitate. But there was also a major innovation. The anatomy professor was now expected to reply to questions put to him regarding the topics dealt with in the lessons. This is the embryo of that feature of Bolognese public anatomy, the dispute, that over the succeeding two centuries, was gradually to become the most important part of the ceremony, and a source of pride for the Studium.\(^{68}\) The dispute was a customary practice at medieval universities, a kind of intellectual contest in which scholars and teachers could pit their wits on days when there were no lessons.\(^{69}\) However, during the fifteenth century, the Bolognese doctors had gradually dropped the practice, because “it seems to them dangerous to put themselves to the test in

\(^{68}\) Ibid., file 6, “Relazione degli Assunti”, with neither author’s name nor date: “Anatomy accompanied by debate . . . affords that decorum to our university that comes from being the only one in which the said function is performed”.

\(^{69}\) See R. Barthes, La retorica antica, Italian trans. (Milan, 1980), pp. 30-1, 42-3; for Bologna, see Zaccagnini, Storia dello Studio di Bologna, pp. 67-8.
public, which is the cause of all excellence”. The situation worsened in the sixteenth century to such an extent that Cardinal Gabriel Paleotti, bishop and later archbishop of Bologna during the second half of the century, was moved to declare: “the disputes of the doctors in their circles have now descended almost to shameful terms”. The 1586 decree ensured the survival, at least during public anatomy lessons, of this institution which, even though the innovations introduced by Vesalius had helped to reinvigorate it, was slowly but surely vanishing from university teaching. Thus of the countless inscriptions that decorated — and in part still decorate — the walls of the Archiginnasio, many celebrated the art of such contemporary anatomists as Flaminio Rota or Giambattista Cortesi, who, in the course of public anatomy lessons, had found rapid solutions to “the very difficult objections raised extemporaneously by distinguished scholars”.72

During the years immediately following the death of Giulio Cesare Aranzio (1589) the legislative framework regulating public anatomy was completed. The attempt to maintain alongside the full professorship a “second place” — that is, a less prestigious chair of anatomy — probably aroused a sense of competition and discord between the various lectors of anatomy. As a result, Gasparo Tagliacozzi proposed the creation of what came to be called the anatomists’ “turno”, which, with the occasional alteration, was to last for two centuries. From this moment on, the names of several anatomy lectors were inscribed in the roll at the same time, and they took it in turn to perform the dissection, “one year one of them, the next year another, according to their doctoral seniority”.73 A few years later, in 1602, the Regulations Drawn up and Passed in Order to Preserve the Dignity and Reputation of the University of Bologna finally determined that there would only be one public anatomy course, and that it would take place during the carnival holiday period, beginning on the feast of Saint Anthony Abbot (17 January).74

While decisions were being reached about the way public anatomy

70 Zaccagnini, Storia dello Studio di Bologna, pp. 52-3, 149.
71 Prodi, Cardinale Gabriele Paleotti, ii, p. 224.
72 G. G. Forni and G. B. Pighi, Le iscrizioni dell’Archiginnasio (Bologna, 1962), no. 243, dedicated to F. Rota; see also nos. 212, 214, 244, 245.
73 Teach-Gnudi and Webster, Life and Times of Gaspare Tagliacozzo, pp. 147, 412. Whereas in Bologna the “second cathedra” only held out for a few years, in Padua it lasted a considerable time, encouraging the internal mobility of the doctors: University of Padua Historical Archives (hereafter U.P.H.A.), folder 665, fos. 143 ff., “Professori di anatomia e chirurgia in II luogo”.
74 Promulgated by Vice-legate Landriani, published by V. Benacci.
lessons were to be organized and the time of year they were to be held, the first permanent theatre of anatomy that the University of Bologna had ever possessed was constructed. Whereas until then everyone had been content with temporary theatres (mentioned in the 1586 decree), at the end of the century this arrangement began to appear inconvenient,75 and perhaps something of a stain on the honour of a discipline that by this time had gained a fine reputation (the sixteenth century was the golden age of Italian and, in particular, Bolognese anatomy). But no doubt the decisive factor was that the rival universities of Padua, Pisa and Pavia (not to mention foreign ones) had already built themselves permanent anatomy theatres.76

We learn from a decision taken in 1595 by the body in charge of the financial management of the University of Bologna, the Congregazione di Gabella Grossa, that shortly afterwards a theatre was built in the Archiginnasio, which was “in the Paduan and Pisan style”, that is, an amphitheatre.77 Unfortunately, however, no drawings or descriptions of it have been preserved. It was probably a simple functional structure. One builder was paid for his work on the building, but all we know about him is his name: Giovanni Battista.78

At the end of the sixteenth century, public anatomy lessons took place once a year during the carnival, in a permanent theatre that

75 The scholars made up their minds to talk to the vice-legate “about building an anatomy theatre, because at present there is no place suitable for such business”: B.S.A., Studio, Università degli scolari artisti, Atti, rec. 381, fo. 46", 4 Jan. 1595.
76 The anatomy amphitheatre in Padua had been built in 1594: G. F. Tomasini, Gymnasium Patavinum . . . libris V comprehensum (Utini, 1654), p. 433; or even as early as 1584: G. Cervetto, Di alcuni illustri anatomici italiani del decimoquinto secolo: indagini (Verona, 1842), pp. 144-6. G. Tiraboschi maintains that before the anatomy theatre of Padua was erected “the one in Pisa had been built, and in imitation thereof the one in Pavia also”: G. Tiraboschi, Storia della letteratura italiana, 2nd edn., 16 vols. (Modena, 1787-94), vii, pt. 2, p. 714. Around the middle of the sixteenth century (by 1569 at the latest) the amphitheatre in Pisa was octagonal in shape: G. Guidi, Universae artis medicinis tomus nonus in quo continentur de anatome libri septem (Frankfurt, 1592), quoted in Firenze e la Toscana dei Medici nell’Europa del Cinquecento: la corte, il mare, i mercanti; la rinascita della scienza; editoria e società; astrologia, magia e alchimia (Florence, 1980), p. 178. Another theatre had been built in Ferrara in 1588: G. Muratori and G. Guidorizzi, “Documento inedito del 1588, riguardante la costruzione del teatro anatomico stabile nell’università di Ferrara”, Atti della III Biennale della Marca per la storia dell’arte medica (Fermo, 1959), pp. 267-8; and, abroad, in Montpellier (1556), London (1557) and Basle (1589); Singer, Short History of Anatomy and Physiology, pp. 166, 167, 171.
77 B.S.A., Gabella Grossa, Libri segreti, I/I (1575-1601), fo. 267*. Pressure to find a solution to the problem was exerted by the representative of the senate, Gonfalonier Galeazzo Paleotti.
78 Ibid., fo. 268*, 7 Dec. 1595. Building work presumably got bogged down. In November 1596 the scholars mobilized “to obtain an anatomy theatre”: B.S.A., Studio, Università degli scolari artisti, Atti, rec. 381, fo. 75*. 

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had been built at the expense of the university. A number of other observations may help to clarify further aspects of the change that had occurred.

During the sixteenth century, the prerogatives of the various universities of scholars — of which Bologna University, controlled by its student associations, was the prototype — were subjected to a great number of restrictions and the universities themselves lost much of their power to the magistrates of the states to which they were subject. Public anatomy, however, was the one course that was still "in the hands of the scholars" — as Aranzio put it in the memorial referred to above. The serious conflict between scholars and lectors that then blew up around public anatomy was resolved, as we have seen, by the decrees promulgated in 1570 and 1586. These bestowed greater prestige and security on the lectors and freed the scholars from any organizational responsibility or financial obligation: they would no longer appoint the anatomy professor, nor would they fix the date of the lesson, nor had they to worry about the expense of building the theatre. They thus became the mere "recipients" of public anatomy lessons, the management of which had been transferred once and for all into the hands of the government and the doctors. With this shift, and with the creation of the anatomy professors' "turns" in 1589, the last vestige of the student-teacher relationship typical of medieval universities had been removed.

In contrast, the public anatomy ceremonial that evolved at the start of the seventeenth century seemed to compensate the scholars in symbolic terms for their real loss of power. As early as the 1586 decree, the professor of anatomy was expected to adopt an attitude of deference towards the representatives of the university. Moreover the seating arrangement of the theatre already indicated — and this was stated explicitly in the new statutes published in 1609 — that the seats closest to the professor were reserved for the prior and for the various counsellors and electors. But this was not all. In the eighteenth-century manuscript entitled "Method, Which until Now Has Been Delivered by the Anatomy Professor, before Undertaking


80 Philosophiae ac Medicinae Scholarium Bononiensis Gymnastii Statuta, pp. 26-8. Teach-Gnudi and Webster, Life and Times of Gaspare Tagliacozzo, pp. 99-100, consider the 1586 decree a skilful piece of mediation.
the Anatomical Investigation”, it was explained that the future professor of anatomy, at the beginning of January, would ask the prior “when he gives the order, that they start the anatomy”, adding that, “mostly, they come to a friendly agreement as to the day”. And it was to the prior that the legate would grant the body for dissection. When it was the anatomy professor’s first “function”, he was obliged to ingratiate himself with those students charged with presiding over the public anatomy sessions, by presenting them with sumptuous gifts. The lector went to considerable expense to purchase these gifts, although this was then taken account of in his salary. In other words, it was public money that financed this complicated redistribution of roles between the participants in public anatomy. The lesson could not begin in the prior’s absence and, by clapping his hands, he could interrupt it whenever he wished. When it came to the dispute, the prior was the first speaker: a position of prestige that perpetuated ancient prerogatives. If one also bears in mind the fact that the necessary corpses and anatomy theatres were more readily available in Italy than in other countries (particularly Germany) — or at least were available at an earlier date — it is not hard to see why public anatomy lessons in Bologna — as in Padua also — were so popular with students, especially foreign ones, and consequently of such importance to the city.

IV

The final period in the history of Bolognese public anatomy when it at last became a prominent event in university and city life, worthy of a place in the chronicles and guidebooks, began with the construction of the new anatomy theatre.

81 B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Annotomia publica, file 2. The ceremonial is very complex and involves other people.
82 B.U.L., MS. 80, fo. 331v, “Ad instructionem”.
83 On the conduct of the prior, see B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Annotomia publica, file 6, “Relazione alle Signorie”.
84 On the economic importance of the scholars, both as consumers and as entrepreneurs, for the city of Bologna, see Zaccagnini, Storia dello Studio di Bologna, p. 189; and the remarks of the Bolognese ambassador to Rome (1566) in a letter included in E. Costa, Ulisse Aldrovandi e lo Studio bolognese nella seconda metà del secolo xvi (Bologna, 1907), p. 77 n. The Studium was one of Bologna’s four main sources of wealth: U. Marcelli, Sagggi economico-sociali sulla storia di Bologna, dal secolo xvi al xviii (Bologna, 1962), p. 3.
85 A. di P. Masini, Bologna perlustrata, 2 vols. (Bologna, 1666), i, p. 204; M. de Blainville, Travels through Holland, Germany, Switzerland, but Especially Italy, 3 vols. (London, 1757), ii, p. 184. I have not gone through all the guidebooks systematically.
At the origin of this initiative lay the formal protest made by a well-known anatomy professor, Giovanni Antonio Godi, about the condition of the old theatre, which had been erected roughly forty years earlier.\(^{86}\) As a result, the Assunti di Studio (senators delegated to supervise the running of the university), backed by funding from the senate which anxiously pressed for a speedy solution to the problem, gave the order for the old amphitheatre to be demolished, without informing the Congregazione di Gabella Grossa, and then proceeded to finance a new one.\(^{87}\) The Gabella was in principle responsible for all university buildings, but actually administered its funds in such a way as to give priority to lectors' stipends. This led to a fierce conflict between the collegiate doctors — who ran the Gabella — and the senate. The dispute, however, was settled by the decision to build a larger and more prestigious theatre in one of the central chambers of the Archiginnasio building.\(^{88}\) The members of the Gabella were fully aware that the new anatomy theatre would be very important, and not merely in scientific and educational terms: they argued that it ought to be founded "in the interests of the splendour, the decoration and the honorific needs of the public schools and the whole city".\(^{89}\) Each time the financial commitment occasioned by the construction of the theatre became more burdensome, the decus and utilitas of the undertaking recurred as its twin motivations. And it should not be forgotten that in the mean time the financial situation of the University of Bologna was steadily deteriorating.

The appointment of professors had in fact been restricted to Bolognese citizens, following a custom that had originated in the fifteenth century and then spread. There was an increase in the number of teaching posts, and consequently a rise in costs, but few famous lecturers, who would have had to be paid large salaries, were co-opted. Further difficulties were created by the obligation to swear allegiance to the Catholic faith before one could gain the entitlement to take a degree, and by the placing on the Index of many famous


\(^{88}\) The conflict ended with the destruction of every archival trace of the order for 200 scudos with which the senate wished to finance the enterprise: \textit{ibid.}, p. 274. The decision to erect the new theatre in the large room beneath the clock was reached on 7 April 1637 (p. 276).

\(^{89}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 287, 9 Oct. 1637, "in publicis scholis [theatrum erigendum est] pro decore ornamentoque ac honorifica necessitate ipsarum ac totius civitatis nostrae".
university texts. The Studium thus lost students of non-Catholic religions and, in general, foreign students because, while the Italian universities, abandoned by their sovereigns, were going through a period of generalized crisis, foreign universities, protected by theirs, were flourishing.\(^{90}\)

Given this overall state of decline, what was the point of public anatomy lessons in general and of an expensive new anatomy theatre in particular? It was a widely held opinion that “the public anatomy function brings such honour to the Studium and is of such attraction to foreign scholars, that it is for this very reason that many choose to attend our university”,\(^{91}\) principally in order to take part in the dispute, a special feature of Bolognese public anatomy.

The very structure of the seventeenth-century anatomy theatre was largely an outcome of the demands of the dispute. Instead of revolving around its original central point, the dissecting table, the new theatre clearly had two focuses. The dissecting table was, as it were, counter-balanced by the cathedra from which the anatomy professor pronounced and defended his theses. The very design of the theatre — a large spacious room, its walls covered with engraved wood, inscriptions and sculptures — and the fact that the spectators had comfortable seats to sit on suggest a relaxed atmosphere, in total contrast with that conjured up by the anatomy theatre in Padua, where the students were forced to stand in six cramped rows, one on top of another. (See Plates 4 and 5.) According to G. Richter, the only scholar who has made a systematic study of the subject, the two theatres — in Padua and in Bologna — serve quite different purposes: the former is a response to primarily functional demands, the latter to eminently “spectacular” ones.\(^{92}\) Whereas the model adopted at


\(^{91}\) B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, *Annotomia publica*, file 6, “Memoriale del dottor Laghi”; Tommaso Laghi was, however, an experimenter in the fields of physics and biology.

\(^{92}\) G. Richter, *Das Anatomische Theater* (Berlin, 1936), pp. 55 ff.
Padua was copied throughout Europe, the Bolognese design had no followers.\textsuperscript{93}

It still remains unclear to whom the \textit{inventio} of this original anatomy theatre is to be ascribed. Although Antonio Levanti, known as the “master-builder of the theatre of anatomy”, is unanimously accorded the entire merit for having built the theatre, when he was entrusted with this task in 1637 he was still virtually unknown, and as yet had little relevant experience.\textsuperscript{94} Moreover the architectural design of the theatre took shape slowly, and new elements, not envisaged in the original plan, were added on gradually: first, the structure of the room itself was completed; then walls were put up and decorated; and lastly, the ceiling was constructed. The various stages spanned the period from 1637 to 1649. Decisions regarding the construction of the theatre were taken within the Congregazione di Gabella Grossa, after the conflict with the senate had been settled. Twelve delegates (\textit{sindaci}), chosen from among the doctors of the colleges of law and of medicine and the arts, and seven officers (\textit{assunti}) sat on the Congregazione. Every two months a prior was elected from among the \textit{sindaci}: it was his job to co-ordinate the business of the Congregazione. As a result, notwithstanding variations in its membership and in the tasks before it, this institution managed to function as a body.

The names that keep recurring throughout the period during which the theatre was being completed and embellished are those of erudite doctors of medicine, well known in their day. Giovanni Fantuzzi must certainly be given the credit for having chosen Levanti as architect and for having got the process of building the theatre moving again in 1637. A year later, it was Agostino Odofredi, who proposed that the wooden statues of the fathers of Bolognese medicine and anatomy be set into special niches along the theatre walls, though this idea was not put into practice until 1640, when Giovanni Fantuzzi was prior and Ovidio Montalbani was in charge of buildings.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., pp. 60-1. Only the anatomy theatre of Greifswald (1750) resembles the Bolognese model. The anatomy theatre in Ferrara, on the other hand, recalls the octagonal variant of the amphitheatre (see n. 76).

\textsuperscript{94} On Antonio de’ Polucci, known as il Levante (or Levanti), see Bologna Archiginnasio Communal Library (hereafter B.A.C.L.), MS. B. 126, M. Oretti, “Notizie de professori del disegno cioè pittori scultori ed architetti bolognesi e de forestieri di sua scuola raccolte ed in più tomi divise” (15 vols.), iv, fos. 161 bis, 162.

\textsuperscript{95} On Giovanni Fantuzzi, see Mazzetti, \textit{Repertorio di tutti i professori}, p. 121; Fantuzzi, \textit{Scrittori bolognesi}, iii, \textit{ad vocem}. On his work as a prior, see B.S.A., Gabella Grossa, \textit{Libri segreti}, 1/4, pp. 292, 294, 295. On Agostino Odofredi, see Mazzetti, \textit{Repertorio di tutti i professori}, p. 225. The proposal to add the statues is to be found in \textit{Libri segreti}, 1/4, p. 316, 15 Dec. 1638; the decision in B.S.A., Gabella Grossa, \textit{Atti}, 1/14, 1628-45, fo. 103\textsuperscript{r}v.
5. The anatomy theatre of Padua: from G. F. Tomasini, *Gymnasmum Patavinum . . . libris V comprehensum* (Utini, 1654)

(Photo: by courtesy of the Bologna Archiginnasio Communal Library)
Montalbani, himself elected prior at the end of 1645, wanted to double the height of the theatre and the number of windows, and give it a wooden ceiling, so that it might become “one of the beautiful and noteworthy buildings of Italy”. Iconographically, the ceiling is certainly the most complex part of the new theatre, with symbolic representations of fourteen constellations gravitating around the figure of Phoebus, the god of medicine. This form of decoration coincides perfectly with the field of interests of Montalbani, who at that time, though still young, was already an erudite eclectic. It seems reasonable to suggest that the architect and wood-carver, Levanti, and Montalbani, who in fact composed the Latin inscriptions for the upper part of the theatre, may have worked together — at least on the ceiling. Yet the history of the construction of the anatomy theatre of Bologna does not end here. Many both functional and ornamental improvements were made, such as the installation around the dissecting table of benches for the auditors who wished to sit close to the body; or three large wooden armchairs for the legate, the vice-legate and the gonfalonier of justice; or the secret compartment “for the authorities, ladies or other persons”, from which one could look into the theatre without being seen. Nor have all the people involved in one way or another in the building of the theatre been mentioned. Nothing, for example, has been said of Ercole Lelli, who carved the two new wooden caryatids that support the roof of the professor’s cathedra. It would also be interesting to know more about the role that the anatomy professors, with their practical demands, played in the design of the theatre. But the pattern that

96 B.S.A., Gabella Grossa, Atti, 1/15, 1645-65, fo. 4r; the decision to go ahead with the building was finally taken on 12 December 1645 (fo. 8r).

97 On Montalbani, the most interesting of the three, see Mazzetti, Repertorio di tutti i professori, p. 215; Fantuzzi, Scrittori bolognesi, vi, ad vocem. On the iconographic design of the ceiling, see G. Loreta, “Il teatro anatomico dell’Archiginnasio e il suo soffitto”, L’Archiginnasio, xxxiii (1938), pp. 223-31.

98 Ibid., 1/4, p. 369, 6 Feb. 1640.

99 Ibid., 1/4, p. 369, 6 Feb. 1640.


103 In 1636 there was the decisive intervention of Antonio Godi; in 1641 the anatomy professor for that year, Costanzo Scotti, made a number of requests “for improvements in the administration of anatomy”: B.S.A., Gabella Grossa, Libri segreti, 1/5, fos. 191r-2r.
has been identified for the earlier phases also holds good for the eighteenth century. It is important to stress that there was no single idea behind the building of the theatre, nor any hard and fast plan. Indeed there was not even a single identifiable “customer”, or at least not in the traditional sense of the term. The anatomy theatre of Bologna was the outcome of a widely felt desire within two different institutions (the senate and the colleges). In the resulting monument — as in a written document — one can discern the contribution of a variety of different authors, without however being able to ascribe to any single one of them the merit of having designed the actual finished product. If, as I believe, Fantuzzi, Odofredi and Montalbani were particularly important in this enterprise, it should be added that the theatre’s iconography corresponds to the culture of a whole group: that of Bolognese doctors, with a medical and philosophical background, during the first half of the seventeenth century.104

The new theatre was in the end extremely symbolic, a kind of sum total of the glories of the Studium. In the lateral niches stood the statues of the fathers of medicine and of the most famous professors of anatomy who had taught at the university. Above them, twenty busts commemorated the great professors of the faculty of medicine and arts, among which was also placed that of Irnerio, the founder of the Studium. The cathedra itself rested significantly on two wooden sculptures portraying human anatomy. From the ceiling, the reigning sciences of astronomy and medicine dominated the proceedings.

Inside the theatre, the seating arrangement respected and emphasized the different roles of the participants in the forms they assumed at the beginning of the century. (See Plate 6.) The dissecting table was surrounded by a balustrade to protect it from the scholars who crowded round it.105 Three rows of benches and an aisle ran around all four walls. The anatomy professor’s cathedra was situated along one of the end walls, as were the prior’s chair and the seats for the counsellors. Against the opposite wall sat the authorities. Along the side walls, “on the right will sit the university, accompanied by its porters with the maces, and the notary; on the left, on the other hand, will sit the entire body of doctors, according to the seniority of their doctorates; and all around, the young scholars”.

Any seats left over were occupied by ordinary citizens, for whom

104 Fantuzzi, Odofredi and Montalbani had graduated in medicine and philosophy and taught logic, theoretical and practical medicine, philosophy, etc.
105 B.S.A., Gabella Grossa, Libri segreti, 1/4, p. 359, 5 Nov. 1639.
there was also standing-room. Every group involved in the life of the Studium was represented officially: the university of scholars, the doctors and the city magistrates. When full the theatre could hold several hundred people. The function of the theatre was perfectly clear to contemporaries. The theatre was defined as “the site consecrated (so to speak) to anatomic demonstrations, which draw more scholars than any other lesson, and which most overawe the professors, and best display the care that the government takes of public welfare”.

V

Having taken a close look at the history of the Bologna anatomy theatre, we can now turn our attention to ideal models for anatomy theatres. The history of these models lies at the meeting-point between the interests of historians of medicine and science, and those of students of the theatre in its various forms.

Both in Italy and abroad, public anatomy lessons had developed in modern times into ritualized ceremonies that were held in places specially set aside for them. Their similarity to theatrical performances is immediately apparent if one bears in mind certain of their features: the division of the lessons into different phases (particularly striking in Bologna), the institution of a paid entrance ticket and the performance of music to entertain the audience, the rules introduced to entertain the audience, the rules introduced to

106 This matches the arrangement for the solemn mass at the beginning of the academic year: Philosophiae ac Medicinae Scholarum Bononensis Gymnasti Statuta, ch. 20. See B.U.L., MS. 125, file 30, “Notizie sopra l’Anatomia, che si fa ogni anno nello Studio pubblico il Carnovale”, fo. 7.

107 “It would be a mistake to think that the full professors or the scholars alone constitute the university, since the full professors, the scholars, the colleges of doctors and the magistrates are all members thereof”: a definition of the general Studium, taken from an eighteenth-century paper cited by Brambilla, Medicina del Settecento, p. 9 n.

108 Five hundred according to R. Faccioli, “Cenno storico descrittivo”, in Archiginnasio di Bologna: omaggio del Collegio degli ingegneri e degli architetti di Bologna agli scienziati commemoranti l’ottavo centenario dello Studio bolognese (Bologna, 1888); a more cautious estimate would be more or less two hundred and fifty.


110 One had to pay to attend public anatomy lessons: in Bologna prior to the 1586 decree; in Ferrara: Statuti, in F. Borsetti-Bolani, Historia almi Ferrariae Gymnastii, 2 vols. (Ferrara, 1735), i, p. 436; in Padua prior to the “ducal” decree of 1596: U.P.H.A., no. 665, fo. 60v, 14 Sept. 1596; for Edinburgh and Holland, see Heckscher, Rembrandt’s Anatomy, pp. 32-3; on London, see n. 33. J. Attali, Vita e morte della medicina, Italian trans. (Milan, 1980), p. 117, mentions tickets for the dissections at the Jardin des Plantes, but it is not clear whether or not they were against payment.

(continued on p. 84)
6. Longitudinal section of the anatomy theatre of Bologna: Bologna State Archives. One can make out the main entrance door, the anatomy professor's cathedra, that of the prior and the counsellor’s seats (on the left); opposite, the places for the “university of scholars”; on the right, the seats for the authorities. Drawing by G. Civoli, after 1734.

(Photo: by courtesy of the Bologna State Archives)
regulate the behaviour of those attending and the care taken over “production”. W. S. Heckscher even argues that many general theatre techniques were originally designed with the performance of public anatomy lessons in mind. In Heckscher’s view, the theatre itself — that is, the erection of a special building to accommodate performances — originated in the anatomy amphitheatre.111

Rather than render research into the origins of the theatre yet more complicated, our aim should be to accord the anatomy theatre full status among the other recognized “theatrical sites”. This would also help to throw new light on the complex web of ancient and modern science/letters/arts/technology which formed the background to the flourishing of architecture and of dramatic performance during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the humanist and Renaissance world the human body was, next to imaginary cities, a second “construction” (fabbrica) around which spectators could be organized within theatrical models that were consciously derived from ancient times. Sometimes this derivation was confused, but at other times it was identified with an almost philological attention. The fact that the human body was thought of, viewed and described in architectural terms has been remarked upon, and the terminological and cognitive relation between anatomy and architecture has been recognized.112

Alessandro Benedetti declared that he was modelling his own theatre on the Arena of Verona and Rome’s Colosseum. At that time, theatres were antonomastically known as Colosseums:113 “Coliseus sive theatrum”, read the caption of an engraving accompanying a number of Venetian editions of Latin plays at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. And, interestingly, it is this engraving that served as inspiration for the student of Titian who designed the frontispiece to Vesalius’ De humani corporis fabrica.114 (Cf. Plates 3 and 4.) Indeed towards the end of the fifteenth century, one of the trends in Italian theatre design — especially in the Veneto region — consisted in a revival of the amphitheatre. It is to this trend that Benedetti’s work may be said to belong.115

(n. 110 cont.)


111 Heckscher, Rembrandt’s Anatomy, pp. 43-4 and n. 59.


115 R. Klein, La forme et l’intelligible (Paris, 1970), trans. into Italian as La forma e l’intelligibile (Turin, 1975), Klein and Zerner, “Vitruvio e il teatro del Rinascimento (cont. on p. 85)
The alternative semicircular model, proposed by the famous Parisian professor of anatomy, Charles Estienne, was more explicitly related to philological research. In his textbook of theoretical and practical anatomy, *De dissectione partium corporis humani*, written in around 1530 but published in 1545, Estienne devoted a long chapter to the description of an ideal Vitruvian-style anatomy theatre, and to how public anatomy lessons should be organized. This subject, he explained, was not unworthy of the anatomist’s attention, since anatomy itself could not be properly demonstrated and taught unless a suitable “anatomical site” (*locus anatomicus*) were arranged for that purpose. Estienne said that anatomy was comparable to any other public show, and a dissected human body to “anything that is exhibited in a theatre in order to be viewed” (*quicquid in theatro spectandum exhibitetur*), which, he wrote, appears a great deal more beautiful and pleasing to the spectators if they are able to see it clearly, from equally good vantage points, and without getting in one another’s way. This was evidently a matter of theatre architecture and Estienne adopted the appropriate terminology. He spoke of the *cavea*, the *hemicyclus* and the *scena*, and calculated the measurements of the seats, and even the location of the various separate entrances and exits for each part of the theatre. Clearly he either had firsthand knowledge of Vitruvius’ *De architectura* — or he collaborated with someone who did.

The link with the ancient world was explicit. For example, with regard to the preparation of the dissecting table, Estienne said, “the anatomy table should be arranged in front of the theatre, in the place where the ancients placed the stage” (*Ante theatrum, quo in loco scenam antiqui constituebant, tabulam anatomicam . . . constituere oportet*). But the connection with dramatic theatre was no less evident: like actors, all those who worked on stage (*scena*) — the medical theorist and the dissectors — had to show their faces to the audience and clearly display the actions that they performed.

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118 Apart from the Italian editions, Vitruvius’ text was also published in Lyons in 1523 and, in a French adaptation, in Paris in 1539. See Richter, *Anatomische Theater*, pp. 32-3.

119 Estienne, *De dissectione*, p. 347.
Charles Estienne felt that his model provided the best answer to the problems and requirements of public anatomy. It is an interesting question why the semicircular design was “forgotten” until the late eighteenth century and why, on the other hand, Benedetti’s amphitheatre model, or variations of it, were used for over three centuries.\(^\text{120}\)

The interest in the theatre design of the ancients that some anatomists displayed during the early Renaissance was no doubt dictated more by practical need than by any genuine philological interest. The fact, however, remains that in order to solve a new problem they fell back on an example provided by the ancient world, and they did so precisely at the moment at which reference back to ancient times was a cultural imperative. It should not be forgotten that doctors, especially if they were physicians rather than surgeons, still underwent a training that had a great deal in common with that of literary scholars. This was a result of the very structure of university courses, which combined logic and philosophy with medicine and anatomy in the doctor’s syllabus.\(^\text{121}\) Benedetti, for example, was also a historian and possessed a thorough knowledge of Latin and Greek authors. The most famous anatomy professors at the University of Paris were at the same time talented Greek scholars.\(^\text{122}\) An effort to reconsider and rewrite the history of theatres — of “theatres prior to the theatre”, as Franco Ruffini has suggested\(^\text{123}\) — also taking into account the “anatomical site”, might well reveal a much richer cultural environment, in which the same people who were interested in an anatomy theatre or a dissection also took an interest in the production of a new play at a court theatre.

One might add that even if the two different types of theatrical “performance” became increasingly distinct with the passage of time, historians of the theatre should perhaps bear in mind the fact that the two kinds of architectural structure (the anatomy theatre and the theatre proper) for centuries led a parallel existence. There is the interesting case, for example, of the scientific theatre of Mantua, built by Antonio Bibiena, the peculiar shape of which might be explained...

\(^{120}\) Richter, Anatomische Theater, pp. 33-4.


\(^{122}\) Lind, Studies in Pre-Vesalian Anatomy, pp. 5-6, 16, 74-5, 78; Heckscher, Rembrandt’s Anatomy, p. 49.

\(^{123}\) Ruffini, Teatri prima del Teatro, introduction.
by the need to reconcile a narrowly musical and theatrical function (hence the bell design) with a more scientific-spectacular function (the reason why Bibiena planned a gallery behind the stage, giving the auditorium something of the appearance of an amphitheatre).\(^{124}\)

In actual fact, during the eighteenth century, not only were operas and musical dramas staged in that particular theatre, but public exercises in anatomy and surgery, carried out by the medical and surgical department of the academy that owned the theatre, also took place there, as did experiments in physics and chemistry.\(^{125}\) A similar link between the expository scientific structure and the theatre might also be detected in the case of the small academic theatre of Castelfranco Veneto.\(^{126}\)

On the other hand, a close comparison of theatre designs, or of imitations of classical stages or architecture, and the Bologna anatomy theatre would probably reveal several links at such a moment of creativity in theatre architecture in the city.\(^{127}\) Indeed it was around the 1640s and 1650s that Alfonso Chenda designed the Teatro della Sala (1639), and Andrea Seghizzi both the Teatro Formagliari (1641) and the Teatro Malvezzi (1653).

VI

It is worth mentioning a further indication of the thoughtful attention that the Bolognese authorities accorded public anatomy lessons: their liberality in keeping the anatomy professors well stocked with bodies for dissection. Most importantly, in Bologna not only were the bodies of those who were executed set aside for anatomy, so too were the “meanest” of those who died in hospital, the ones who were buried free of charge in the San Giovanni Decollato cemetery.\(^{128}\) This


\(^{126}\) Ricci, _Teatri d’Italia_, pp. 122-5.

\(^{127}\) I have in mind, for example, the Capitoline Theatre (1513), the “Horses’ Chamber” frescoed by Giulio Romano in the Palazzo Te in Mantua and Palladio’s Olimpic Theatre in Vicenza. On seventeenth-century Bolognese theatre architecture, see D. Lenci, “Il luogo teatrale”, in A. Berselli (ed.), _Storia dell’Emilia-Romagna_, 3 vols. (Imola, 1975-80), ii, pp. 739-40.

\(^{128}\) See B.S.A., Legato, _Bandi_, xxxv, “Privilegi degli scolari”, 4 Nov. 1660, which reproduced the _Privilegi_ promulgated in 1594 by Vice-legate Bandini; at the end of the seventeenth century the senate sought from the pope a breve on the issue: A. Gallassi, “Carteggio inedito”, _Rivista di storia delle scienze mediche e naturali_, xli (1950), supplement to no. 1, pp. 135-56. The problem was resolved by the _Notificazione_ (cont. on p. 88)
ensured a fairly regular supply of subjects, though the “function” could still at times be delayed and set at risk by a lack of corpses. On such occasions, the students would take to roaming the city in search of the body of someone who had suddenly died. The following incident, for example, occurred in 1681:

On 19 January, outside the San Mamolo city gate, during the procession of the carnival masks, Giuseppe Cipolla da Gaibola was killed by another peasant . . . The scholars, having heard of the murder, hurried to the scene to obtain the cadaver for the anatomy; but the peasants having gathered there in good number did not let them take the body away, and the scholars were obliged to be patient. 129

Indeed they remained patient until 30 January, when the body of a certain Antonio Bagnoli da Bagni di Lucca, who had been executed, became available for anatomical examination: “and it should be remembered that the poor wretch had been condemned to prison for life, but that to satisfy the demands of the scholars, the cardinal legate overruled the decree that had already been passed, and had him condemned to death.” 130

Another problem that the Bolognese authorities had to resolve in order that the gran fontione of public anatomy could be held related to the recruitment of the lectors whose task it was to perform the lesson. Aranzio and all later professors of anatomy were rewarded with a full stipend. Then, during the seventeenth century and to an even greater extent in the eighteenth century, the chair of anatomy became a sinecure and at one point there were eighteen lectors at the same time. 131 Despite this, it was not always possible to find somebody willing to teach the public anatomy. This was because it was a very special kind of course, shorter than normal but much more demanding, and above all, very risky for the anatomy professor’s reputation. For during the dispute the professor had to answer, in public, questions put to him without prior warning by lectors from various different disciplines. The professors of anatomy therefore either avoided this test completely by declaring that they were sick, or they managed to submit to it very rarely — once every six or seven years 132 — taking advantage of the fact that the chairs had increased

(n. 128 cont.)
written by Cardinal Lambertini. Anatomists, however, had a preference for convicts’ bodies: B.S.A., Studio, Università degli scolari artisti, Attri, rec. 382, fo. 32'.
130 Ibid., p. 127.
131 See Martinotti, Insegnamento dell’anatomia, p. 90; B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, Annotomia publica, file 6, passim.
in number, and that as a result their turn did not come round too often. The senate of Bologna responded to this state of affairs which, it was feared, might eventually discredit public anatomy, in two ways: first, with pay increases, and secondly, with a series of reforms designed to rationalize the organization of public anatomy lessons.

These attempts alternated throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the late eighteenth century silver medals were minted and handed out to the debaters as a way of encouraging them to take part in the dispute. Moreover those professors of anatomy who distinguished themselves in debate received special acknowledgement and gained an uncommon degree of prestige. Giovan Battista Capponi, after a particularly memorable public anatomy lesson, during which he had debated brilliantly with “distinguished foreign philosophers, anatomists and surgeons”, had the honour of being fêted at the legate’s table.

VII

Whereas enthusiasm for the spectacular aspect of the “function” was widespread, opinions as to its scientific and educational value, as early as the seventeenth century but much more so in the eighteenth, were unanimously harsh. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Luigi Ferdinando Marsili, the founder of the Istituto delle Scienze, expressed the following view of public anatomy lessons: “that noisy and rushed 8 or 10 day anatomy course, in which the students cannot see everything that it befits scholars to observe . . . [and] in which the bones, the nerves, the arteries and the muscles are mostly not shown”. None the less, Marsili also felt that public anatomy lessons should be preserved, “purely for the sake of the decorum of the chairs”. The teaching that the institute imparted in its “esercizj” had to be of a totally different kind: rather than

133 See in particular the decree approved in December 1668: B.S.A., Senato, Partitorum, xxxix, fo. 85r; the reform of 17 November 1713: xlv, fo. 155v; and the definitive Lex pro anatomicis: il, fos. 14r-15r, 17 Aug. 1731.
anything resembling a lesson, it consisted of “observations, operations, experiments, and other things of like nature”.138

Public anatomy lessons were also charged with being “in actual fact more a matter of pomp and of honouring the Studium than of real use to the scholars” and “useless . . . to anatomic history . . . [because] without making continual observations, that science cannot progress”.139 Displaying the principal organs of a healthy body was not actually of great scientific relevance, considering that from the seventeenth century onwards most advanced medical research was concentrated in the fields of physiology, microscopic or pathological anatomy, or the anatomy of particular systems (circulatory, lymph, etc). Indeed these areas of research had prospered outside the Studium, with the organization of private dissections, as well as at numerous scientific academies where, it is worth noting, the same professors of anatomy as worked at the Studium also exercised their professional skills.140 Other breakthroughs in research had been achieved in newly introduced university courses: but not in the anatomy theatre, and not during the carnival.141

All these different and parallel kinds of anatomical investigation were more satisfactory educationally than public anatomy lessons, because they enabled students to observe the various parts of the body at a closer range. Sometimes they even had the opportunity to use magnifying glasses or microscopes, and to soak the specimens or to inject them with various substances.142

Although the often damning criticisms of public anatomy tended to originate from within the university environment itself or from

138 “Le costituzioni dell’Istituto delle Scienze”, ch. 5, in Atti legali per la fondazione dell’Istituto delle Scienze (Bologna, 1728), p. xxv.
141 Motuproprio di Benedetto XIV instituente una Scuola di Chirurgia nella città di Bologna (Bologna, 1742). See also F. Baldelli, “Tentativi di regolamentazione e riforme dello Studio bolognese nel ‘700”, Il Carrobbio, x (1984), p. 14, regarding the new university courses on anatomy. As early as the seventeenth century, dissections were carried out in the “secret theatre” or in rooms set aside for secret dissections: B.S.A., Gabella Grossa, Libri segreti, 1/6, fos. 170-1, 1664; the lex pro anatomicis made it compulsory to complete the dissections after the public anatomy lessons. But the senate would not permit the anatomy theatre to be put to a non-ceremonial use: B.S.A., Studio, Università degli scolari artisti, Atti, rec. 392, pp. 33-4, 1668.
committees that managed the Studium, the courses continued to be celebrated in more or less the same way right until the end of the eighteenth century. Newly founded scientific institutions and forms of teaching that might otherwise have “wasted” the corpses available or distracted students’ attention from public anatomy lessons had to avoid competing with them in any way.  

Every attempt to meddle with or abolish the “function” came to nothing.

The senators who sat on the Assunteria di Studio were utterly convinced that public anatomy lessons, providing they were held with decorum, would prove satisfactory to the scholars and would restore the university to its ancient splendour. To attempt to modify the institution, on the other hand, would, in their view, have meant “endangering, even with regard to this part, the slight fame that our Studium has managed to retain — perhaps solely as a result of this ‘function’ — given that unfortunately all other departments are suffering a remarkable eclipse”.

The last onslaught on the “function” was led by two enlightened intellectuals, Francesco Algarotti and Giovanni Ristori. In 1760 the course in public anatomy was held by L.M.A. Caldani, a supporter of Haller’s theory of irritability. Algarotti recounted that Caldani, having spent the winter teaching the scholars a “useful and tranquil anatomy, then climbed up onto the cathedra [of the theatre] and commenced with a useless and riotous one”. This, Algarotti thought, was “a left-over from the old way of proceeding”, “a relic of scholastic conclusions”. Despite the attacks to which he was subjected in the theatre by his opponents, Caldani “contented the learned and confused the antagonists . . . [and] those who in any case knew nothing either of Latin or of anatomy, imagined that what he said was right”. Even more scathingly, Ristori, in the journal entitled Memorie enciclopediche, wrote: “What possible profit could ever be drawn from one who, like the charlatans, sets about instantly dispelling every doubt, every difficulty, without leaving himself any time whatever for reflection, enquiry or experience?”.

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143 Philosophiae ac Medicinae Scholarium Bononiensis Gymnasii Statuta, p. 28; “Costituzioni dell’Istituto delle Scienze”, ch. 7, p. xxvii; Motuproprrio di Benedetto XIV.


146 F. Algarotti, Opere, 10 vols. (Cremona, 1778-84), x, pp. 265-76, letter from Algarotti to A. Vallisnieri dated 5 Feb. 1760; the passages cited are on pp. 273, 272, 275.

The “function” continued to be held for a further forty years until 1800, even surviving the arrival of the French. Like other forms of teaching and features of the ancient Studium, it finally disappeared with the Napoleonic reforms of university studies, which paid much greater attention to the professional training of aspiring doctors and surgeons than to their oratorical skills or perpetuation of prestigious traditions.\footnote{\textsuperscript{148}}

But significantly enough, it was precisely during this last period of its life, when there was an atmosphere abroad of at least formal egalitarianism, that it suddenly became apparent just how out of date the “function” was. In 1798 there arose “a few slight disorders... owing to the continuation of certain small distinctions and privileges, relating to the former prior of the scholars and the professors, which were practised in the former state of aristocracy”.\footnote{\textsuperscript{149}} How could the “function” possibly be celebrated if one had to call everybody “citizen”, if it were forbidden to resort to syllogisms, if Latin were banned, if one had to avoid “any distinction of position or title”, to dress in “normal civilian clothes”\footnote{\textsuperscript{150}} and, despite everything, to attend the lessons in a theatre whose very architecture had been designed to distinguish between the different orders of participants? In 1799 “at the function of anatomy, the professors’ seats were confusedly occupied by citizens”.\footnote{\textsuperscript{151}}

In 1803, with the creation of the reformed departmental university, the Palazzo dell’Archiginnasio was significantly abandoned in favour of a new main building, the Science Institute building (Palazzo Poggi).\footnote{\textsuperscript{152}} From this date onwards, the old anatomy theatre which, like the schools, became municipal property was used for the most...
THE ANATOMY THEATRE OF BOLOGNA

varied of purposes, but never again for the “function” for which it had originally been erected. Some argued that the old theatre was an irreplaceable scientific and educational building, but even if one disregards reasons of an ideological character — which almost led to the demolition of the theatre — the anatomy professors themselves were probably happy to be rid of an apparatus that by this time was out of all proportion to their research and teaching requirements. The opinion of Carlo Mondini, the most renowned anatomist at the turn of the century, is significant. He taught at the Istituto delle Scienze, was full professor of anatomy at the Studium, and himself held public anatomy lessons in the theatre. It was probably on taking up his post as professor of human anatomy at the new university that Mondini wrote a memoir in which he expressed what he thought were the needs of the newly created chair of anatomy. In his view, a new amphitheatre needed to be built, which should be small and well lit, with seats for students close to the dissecting table, and he added:

No doubt I shall be told that there is the anatomy theatre, built so many years ago for this purpose, and likewise put to use. But its huge size, and the remoteness of the cathedra and of the students’ benches from the anatomy table, however convenient it may be when there are many people attending to hear a learned and elegant anatomical dissertation and an ingenious dispute, is equally inconvenient for the observation and contemplation of the anatomical preparations arranged on the table. As a result, when these are to be displayed, the scholars crowd around the table in such a way that only a very few of them can actually view and profit from the demonstration.

VIII

Having completed this long outline, we can now appreciate the justice of Heckscher’s observation that public anatomy lessons were organized as a spectacle for the purpose of celebrating the authority

156 For Carlo Mondini, see M. Medici, *Elogio di Carlo Mondini* (Bologna, 1830); Mazzetti, *Memorie storiche*, pp. 94-5.
157 B.S.A., Studio, Università unite, *Titolo II, Musei e stabilimenti scientifici*, folder 462, copy of letter. The new semicircular theatre was to be commissioned from the architect Filippo Antolini; the drawings have been conserved in B.U.L., Rotuli 80, *Piante degli edifici universitari della città di Bologna*, tables II, III, IV (1818).
of an institution. Bolognese public anatomy, although it fits into a wider European framework, was something of a special case, given the decline of what had once been the most renowned Studium in Europe. Indeed it was precisely when the university's fame and ability to attract students fell away most sharply that the city authorities went to the greatest lengths to promote the public anatomy "function" and the theatre itself, and to pamper the anatomy professors. The ceremonial, the attendance of all the most important magistrates and judges, the architectural design of the theatre and even the statements made by contemporaries all suggest that the authorities did not really expect students to be attracted by the course's educational value. Indeed the "function" could only give them a very vague idea of human anatomy. Nor could the authorities count on the likelihood of what was an annual rite becoming once again an important opportunity for research, as it had been at the time of Vesalius and Aranzio. The public anatomy course certainly gave students a chance to watch a systematic dissection, but above all it was a ceremony, and it may even have been the scholars' only real opportunity to assert their prerogatives and their — by this time merely symbolic — power over the Studium and the professors. As far as the lecturers in anatomy and the doctors taking part in the debate were concerned, especially if they were young and ambitious, the dispute was a chance to acquire prestige among any foreign visitors as well as before the government of Bologna, from which they might hope to obtain an increase in their stipend. In their turn, those representing political power in Bologna rendered the ceremony yet more solemn by their attendance, and were careful to maintain their control over it. They continued to hope that if the anatomy theatre filled with people and the "function" were a success, the university might attract more scholars to fill the otherwise deserted Archiginnasio building and to restore the university's prestige and the financial health of the city.

The public anatomy lessons did not, however, take place only before the spectators/actors that I have mentioned. Other people also took part, a frequens populus consisting partly of learned men, such

158 Heckscher, Rembrandt's Anatomy, p. 46.
159 In 1689 the Studium was attended by barely "sixty matriculated students counting lawyers and artists, viz. a smaller number than that of the lecturers": Marsili, Memoria, p. 392. This situation was well known abroad: see Martinotti, Insegnamento dell'anatomia, p. 141 n. 1; Blainville, Travels, ii, p. 184.
160 See the case of G. B. Capponi, who obtained a rise following the sumptuous public anatomy lesson put on in 1664: B.S.A., Senato, Filze, 1663-4, fos. 156-7. See also the view of the jurist F. Mezzavacca, in B.U.L., MS. 80, Scritture, fo. 364.
as the chroniclers who would then describe the proceedings, and partly of a nameless audience that has left no trace. Cultivated Bolognese society no doubt shared that intricate web of attitudes towards anatomical dissection that W. Schupbach reconstructed in his examination of Rembrandt’s *Anatomy of Dr. Tulp*.\(^{161}\) Traces could in fact be found even in Bologna of the two contrasting interpretations of anatomy that were adopted by anatomists and thinkers: it was viewed as the discipline that disclosed the magnificent hand of God in the perfection of our corporeal machinery, while at the same time declaring the transience and nullity of man’s life on earth.\(^{162}\) This second aspect is given clear literary expression in a sonnet that circulated in Bologna in manuscript form. In a heavy-handed baroque style, this poem refers to a “system of skeletons, and other anatomized parts of the human body, contrived in the hospital of the Holy Spirit” in Rome, and begins:

Here, where in order to hem in human pride,
There stands a trophy of fleshless skeletons . . .

and ends thus:

So why then do you raise your impudent head,
Wretched humanity, while our life depends
Upon the corpses of others?\(^{163}\)

None the less, it has to be said that “moralized anatomy” never became a major pictorial current in Italy as it did, for example, in Holland. It is a rare theme employed — as, for example, in the frontispiece to Vesalius’ *Fabrica*, drawn by artists from the Veneto — to overlap with the theme of vanitas in a secular scene in order to render the scene more penetrating within the contemporary mental outlook, and to compensate for the crudity of the anatomic image


\(^{162}\) See, for example, the notices for the public anatomy lessons or the eulogies of anatomy professors collected in B.S.A., Assunteria di Studio, *Serie di annue lezioni*, folder 1; B.S.A., Studio, Università degli scolari artisti, Recapiti, folders 400, 402. See also the inscriptions in the Archiginnasio building: Forni and Pighi, *Iscrizioni dell’Archiginnasio, passim*.  

\(^{163}\) Qui dove a rintuzzar l’orgoglio humano
s’apre un trofeo di scheletri spolpati . . .
Or perché dunque ergi la testa ardita
misera umanità, mentre dipende
dai cadaveri altrui la nostra vita?


with a piteous or classical iconography.\textsuperscript{164} It should not be forgotten, furthermore, that to an educated seventeenth- and eighteenth-century audience the concept of anatomy was a commonplace metaphor in art for death and time, and in every branch of learning for analysis.\textsuperscript{165}

But what was the attraction of public anatomy lessons for an uneducated audience that was not involved in any way in the delicate relations between the political authorities and the university, that understood neither Latin nor anatomy, and that perhaps even came dressed in carnival disguise? I shall approach this problem later from another angle.

Bolognese sources offer two possible explanations for the fact that public anatomy lessons were held during the carnival: first, that January was the best month for conserving the corpses: and secondly, that this timing enabled people who were on holiday to benefit from the \textit{utilia spectacula}.

As far as the first point is concerned, there is in fact no reason why the public anatomy lessons could not have been held in other equally cold periods such as Lent, for example, or during the Christmas holidays. The latter alternative would have had the additional advantage that, just as during the carnival holidays, lessons were suspended at Christmas, and hence a greater number of students and doctors would have been free to attend. Indeed other public as well as private dissections, performed for educational purposes, took place right through the winter in a variety of venues. It was not therefore the mere study of anatomy but rather the public anatomy ceremony itself that was tied to the carnival. Given that the association of the two events dates right back to the first half of the sixteenth century, it seems reasonable to suppose — considering the complex demands of this particular course (climate, audience attendance, etc.) — that the carnival period was the most satisfactory period in the whole of the winter. This hypothesis is indirectly confirmed by a comment that Malpighi made about an unsuccessful public anatomy course held


During Lent in 1680: "as it was out of season, few people attended". With a different emphasis, the chronicler Ghiselli, meditating on a public dissection that had by way of exception been performed in April, declared that "it was held during Holy Week, a thing that has never again been practised because it appeared to everyone improper at such a time when all efforts ought to be engaged in attending the churches, and assisting at the divine offices". Whereas it was obviously quite proper to attend public anatomy lessons during the carnival.

These statements' lack of clarity about the timing of the public anatomy lessons is compounded by the problem of how to account for the fact that uneducated sections of the public apparently wished to attend them. This dual issue does not concern Bologna alone. The relation between the various decisions reached in Bologna on the one hand, and these same decisions and the contemporary life of other universities on the other, still has to be explained. In several other Italian universities, public anatomy lessons were also linked to the carnival, even if this was generally a temporary rather than, as in Bologna, an established phenomenon. In Pisa public anatomy lessons were held during the carnival from the founding of the Studium (1544) until the early eighteenth century; in Rome until the late seventeenth century, and thereafter during Lent: in Ferrara at least from 1600 onwards (but the eighteenth-century reform turned them into a three-month course); in Turin at least from the 1729 reform onwards. In Padua in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries public anatomy lessons were held either at Christmas or during the carnival. During the seventeenth century, a second chair of anatomy was added, which competed with a dissection during Lent, while the *prima anatomes* took place regularly during the carnival. In Venice...

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167 Ghiselli, "Memorie antiche manuscritte", li, pp. 105-6, 1689.
168 For Pisa, see G. Targioni Tozzetti, *Notizie sulla storia delle scienze fisiche in Toscana* (Florence, 1852), p. 218; for Turin, the *Costituzioni di Sua Maestà per l'Università di Torino* (Turin, 1729), pp. 35-6; for Ferrara, the *Costituzioni sopra lo Studio di Ferrara* (Ferrara, 1614 and 1639) and the *Statuti dell'almo Studio di Ferrara approvati dalla Santità di nostro Signore PP. Clemente XIV* (Rome, 1771), ch. 8; for Florence, see B.U.L., MS. 125, file 30, "Notizie sopra l'Anatomia", fo. 1; for Rome, F. M. Renazzi, *Storia dell'Università di Roma*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1803-5), ii, pp. 127, 171; iv, pp. 248-9, 390; for Padua, see both Tomasini, *Gymnasium Pataviniun*, pp. 79-80, 150-4, 303 (on the second cathedra of anatomy and related public displays); Favaro, "Insegnamento anatomico di G. Fabrici d'Acquapendente", pp. 107-36, and also the entire folder no. 665 preserved in U.P.H.A., in which one can find a trace of anatomy lessons held from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Whereas in Naples, for example, there was no fixed period set aside for the public anatomy lessons: (cont. on p. 98)
and Mantua the dissections, which were performed by the cities' medical colleges, took place during Lent. Despite this imprecise distinction between Christmas, the carnival and Lent, at whatever time of year and in whichever city public anatomy lessons were held (it could just as well be Amsterdam or Paris), public dissections seem always to have been festive as well as solemn occasions, and to have attracted an audience of spectators not themselves engaged in the discipline.\textsuperscript{169}

Benedetti wanted guards to protect his theatre, “to restrain the importunate plebs”. Vesalius declared that huge crowds attended his dissections of the genital organs.\textsuperscript{170} In the middle of the sixteenth century Charles Estienne drew up the plan for an anatomy theatre to house an audience consisting not only of anatomy experts, students and surgeons, but also of those who “like to contemplate the work of art produced by nature”, as well as of the vaguely defined \textit{vulgus}.\textsuperscript{171} In 1596 admittance to public anatomy lessons in Padua was made free of charge, “in order that everyone [might] come into the theatre and follow the course without having to pay anything at all”.\textsuperscript{172} As a result, in the seventeenth century “all kinds of spectators, without distinction, were admitted with greater freedom and without any charge whatsoever”.\textsuperscript{173} In the seventeenth century an anatomist criticized Harvey for performing dissections before an audience that included not only experts but also members of “the ignorant mass who, with their mouths hanging open, think they are witnessing wonders”.\textsuperscript{174}

As for Bologna, as we have already seen, public anatomy lessons see N. Cortese, “L'età spagnola”, in \textit{Storia dell'Università di Napoli}, pp. 254, 255, 312-13.\textsuperscript{168 cont.}

\textsuperscript{169} For Amsterdam, see Heckscher, \textit{Rembrandt's Anatomy}, pp. 26, 191; for Venice, Bernardi, \textit{Prospetto storico-crítico}, pp. 60 ff.; for Mantua, L. Rossetti, “W. Rolfinck e lo Studio di Padova: Nuovi documenti inediti”, \textit{Quaderni per la storia dell'Università di Padova}, nos. 9-10, pp. 231-2 (in January 1628 three public anatomy lessons were held at the same time in Padua, Venice and Mantua); and G. Barozzi, “La città e la festa: Mantova e il carnevale tra Settecento e Ottocento”, \textit{La ricerca folklorica}, no. 6, (1982), p. 67. For Padua, see F. Caldani, \textit{Memorie intorno alla vita e alle opere di L.M.A. Caldani} (Modena, 1822), pp. xiii-xiv. In Paris public dissections were performed at the Jardin du Roi: G. Brice, \textit{Description nouvelle de la ville de Paris: ou, recherche curieuse}, 2 vols. (Paris, 1700), ii, pp. 13, 17. See also Molière's \textit{Le malade imaginaire}, II.vi, which was written for the carnival.


\textsuperscript{171} Estienne, \textit{De dissectione}, p. 347.

\textsuperscript{172} See n. 110.

\textsuperscript{173} Tomasini, \textit{Gymnasium Patavini}, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{174} Quoted by Schupbach, \textit{Paradox of Rembrandt's Anatomy}, pp. 25-6.
were attended by people who were not “of good quality” and who, instead of listening and learning, created an uproar and conducted themselves “without due modesty”. After the promulgation of the 1586 decree, which among other things made admittance to the lectures free of charge, the situation did not alter. In 1594 the university of the scholars resolved “that no one, regardless of class or station, might enter the anatomy session masked, nor under any circumstances remain there in that state”. In 1616, however, the university notary recorded that, last of all, attendance of the public anatomy course was thrown open to “whoever wishes to hear or to see, whether or not they are masked, and whether or not they are armed”.

The attitude of the ordinary Dutch people who paid for their tickets to attend public anatomy lectures does not seem to have been so very different. Several laws enacted at the start of the seventeenth century aimed to stamp out forms of behaviour inappropriate to the solemnity of the annual dissection, such as chatting, laughing, asking indecent questions or grabbing hold of the organs prepared by the dissector. In Germany, during the first few years of the seventeenth century, the anatomy professor had to warn the spectators “that in particular during the demonstrations of the female genitalia, they should contemplate everything with chaste eyes”, and historians of medicine tell of spectators wearing disguises at the public anatomy lecture.

In my view, these phenomena form part of an extra-scientific (or perhaps merely extra-academic) perception of anatomy, exemplified by a late sixteenth-century Dutch woodcut in which the illustration of the new anatomy theatre in Amsterdam is flanked by an invitation — addressed above all to women — to attend the lectures in order to ascertain how people really appear beneath their clothing. The passage relied on the dual sense of the Dutch word “vleesch” (flesh). It is perfectly evident that these spectators were motivated by a sensibility very different from that which now prevails, and yet one cannot simply write off the attendance of “uneducated” people at

175 B.S.A., Studio, Università degli scolari artisti, Atti, rec. 381, fo. 22r, 12 Jan. 1594, “quod nullus allicuius ordinis et conditionis sit possit larvatus ingredi ad anatomiam nec ibi aliquo modo sic permanere”.
177 Heckescher, Rembrandt’s Anatomy, p. 28.
178 Petermann, Theses inaugurales, fo. 3r.
179 Toply, quoted in Martinotti, Insegnamento dell’anatomia, p. 140 n. 2.
180 Heckescher, Rembrandt’s Anatomy, p. 31.
the lectures — which after all was a constant and not a transient phenomenon — as “whims of fashion” or indications of “depraved tastes”.181

The interest in and attendance at public executions — another constant phenomenon in Europe during this period — is similar in many ways. Here it was not so much the physical elimination of the convict that counted as the spectacular dimension of the punishment inflicted. In Italian chronicles as well as in the *Libri dei giustiziati* [Books of the Condemned] one often comes across descriptions of tortures very like those reproduced by Michel Foucault at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*.182 Such executions include additional forms of bodily mutilation, similar to those carried out during anatomical investigations (sometimes performed on the convict prior to his death), not to mention amputations and other operations which were often an integral part of the punishment. These spectacles, public anatomies on the one hand and executions on the other, both spread rapidly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and are interrelated, not only by a number of similarities, but also by an element that is common to both: the body of the convict.183 In Rome, at least until the end of the seventeenth century, the relation was utterly explicit: “[public anatomy lessons] were performed on carnival days, given that the anatomy professor had to use the cadaver of the convict executed on the Saturday previous to the carnival”.184

The execution itself was a “function”, an event that was ritualized in such a way as to reorder its profound violence. But in the case of public anatomy, once the issue of the soul’s destiny had been resolved by engaging “comforters” to minister to the convicts before their deaths, and by having masses said for them at the expense of the anatomy professors, attention could at last be devoted to the bodies. It should not be forgotten that dead bodies, those of convicts as well as those of children, were the object of procedures within popular medicine, and of official pharmaceutical prescriptions. What was sought after above all was the fat, but also blood, teeth, hair, burnt

skull, the umbilicus, and other parts and substances of the body that possessed specific healing properties.\textsuperscript{185} Human fat, "purified and liquefied, like that of other animals", was generally extracted from the bodies of convicts by the executioner — sometimes as the last act of execution — purified, and then sold as a pain-killer.\textsuperscript{186} In England the mere contact with the cadaver of someone who had been hanged was considered to be therapeutic.\textsuperscript{187}

Such habits by themselves merit a full investigation, but I shall not attempt that here. I should like to emphasize, however, that, even at a very superficial level, a very close relation between the living and the dead must have existed. The dead body was not perceived as something that had been totally lost and was now extraneous to the community of the living. Rather, it was still considered positively as something useful which, in a certain sense at least, was alive and vital. The belief that the body, after death, retained some of its former faculties, especially a form of sensitivity, is of very ancient origin in the west. In his fascinating essay on Boniface VIII and his legislation against the dismemberment of cadavers, E. A. R. Brown has highlighted the way in which the medieval practice — which the highest reaches of society actually preserved right up to the nineteenth century — of burying the different parts of the body in the various burial places of other dear ones and forefathers, was based on the belief that the dead person could derive satisfaction from this arrangement.\textsuperscript{188} Also, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, doctors and jurists agreed that the body after death retained a degree of "sensitivity". This notion provided the basis for a legal norm, the \textit{jus feretri}, according to which the reaction of a dead body in the presence of its presumed assassin constituted valid proof.\textsuperscript{189}


\textsuperscript{186} G. Manara, \textit{Notti malinconiche, nelle quali con occasione di assistere a condannati a morte, si propongono varie difficoltà spettanti a simile materia} (Bologna, 1668), p. 296.

\textsuperscript{187} Linebaugh, "Tyburn Riot", pp. 109 ff. See also L. C. F. Garmann, \textit{De miraculis mortuorum libri tres} (Dresden and Leipsig, 1709), ch. 174, "Dissertatio de cadavere in genere".


It may even be that this set of convictions underlay the opposition of those condemned to death to their becoming subjects for dissection. The feeling of "discomfort" that those condemned to death said they felt at the idea that they were to be dissected and flayed in order to remove the fat from their bodies prompted their "comforters" (the priests engaged to minister to them prior to their execution) to think up secular responses to terrors that were not of a religious nature, such as the following:

little does it matter if a cadaver decays in the earth, when it is devoid of feelings, if it is rent, if it is cut, if it is divided, if it is consumed; in any case, in the sepulchre, it will hardly be in a better condition: it will be thoroughly anatomized by flies, worms, rats, spiders, since it will be torn apart, skinned, and stripped of its flesh, by the teeth of these creatures.\textsuperscript{190}

By way of comparison with the feelings of those who, without any choice in the matter, were to be used as subjects for anatomical dissection, it is interesting to note the extreme willingness that François de Sales, a great saint of the Counter-Reformation, expressed:

I wish really for only one thing, that when I have expired, you shall deliver my body over to the doctors to perform the anatomy of it; it will be a relief to me to know that at least I shall serve the public in some way being dead, since I have been of no service during my life.\textsuperscript{191}

There is little documentary evidence of the attitude of people who attended the public dissections for the sake of sheer entertainment. But what evidence there is, combined with overall context of feelings towards the body concerned, corresponds closely to the work which — based on totally different documentary evidence — the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin has done on popular culture and carnival literature in his research into the work of Dostoevsky and Rabelais. In his essay on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin describes the nature of the carnivalesque vision of the world and its essential difference from official culture, which were expressed on festive occasions, and in particular during the most important popular celebration, the carnival. One of the themes that he most emphasizes is the ambivalence of every state, perceived as inevitably subjected to change, to alternation. This is the profound significance of the "world turned upside down", which does not involve merely the contrast of contrary situations. Within this category of ambivalence there are other expressive forms which are worth mentioning here: carnivalesque

\textsuperscript{190} Manara, Notti malinconiche, p. 298. In Germany the opposition to dissection of those condemned to death was considerable: Petermann, Theses inaugurales, fo. A4'.
\textsuperscript{191} M. Vovelle, Mourir autrefois: attitudes collectives devant la mort aux xviie et xviiie siècles (Paris, 1974), p. 47.
laughter, related to ritual laughter; the combination of that which is normally kept separate, profanation and obscenity. Writing of the folk roots of the culture of the carnival, Bakhtin insists that carnival categories are not abstract ideas, but rather "concretely sensuous ritual-pageant 'thoughts' experienced and played out in the form of life itself, 'thoughts' that had coalesced and survived for thousands of years among the broadest masses of European mankind". Bakhtin adds that, despite its ancient origins:

During the Renaissance, one could say that the primordial elements of carnival swept away many barriers and invaded many realms of official life and worldview . . . . Even antiquity, as assimilated by the humanists of the epoch, was to a certain extent refracted through the prism of the carnival sense of the world. The Renaissance is the high point of carnival life.  

In another essay, Bakhtin uncovers in Gargantua and Pantagruel, a monument of Renaissance writing composed in the years 1532-42, the living presence and elaboration of all the major motifs of popular carnivalesque culture. In particular, he identifies as the dominant theme of the work a "grotesque" conception of the body, in which there is a blending of motifs drawn from the popular sense of what was comic, and of others of a learned origin, deriving from classical medical tradition. Rabelais describes the victims of the most atrocious and fantastic of massacres in terms half-way between the culinary and the anatomical, and Bakhtin points out that Rabelais, himself a doctor, was, on at least one occasion, praised as an anatomist. Rabelais's prose is enriched with anatomical terms, which help to recreate the ancient topos of popular imagination, the "carnivalesque death", in which the bodies are dismembered and torn to pieces in cruel delight. To grasp the profoundly positive significance of these images, however, we must relate them to the carnivalesque conception of the world, so much alive during the Renaissance, in which ambiguity dominates and where everything is tied "to the world's gay matter, which is born, dies and gives birth, is devoured and devours; this is the world which continually grows and multiplies".  

Bakhtin devotes a brief passage to public dissections, "a rare novelty, attracted wide circles of cultured society". Perhaps pre-

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192 M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. C. Emerson (Manchester, 1984), pp. 122-35; quotations are taken respectively from p. 123 and p. 130.  
193 M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World (Cambridge, Mass., 1968). Attention is drawn to the connection between anatomy during carnival and this work of Bakhtin in Barozzi, "Città e la festa", pp. 67-8.  
194 Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, p. 360. See also pp. 354-67.  
195 Ibid., p. 195 (without the author's italics). See also p. 217, and passim.  
196 Ibid., p. 360.
cisely because it was educated society that took an interest in dissec-
tions, Bakhtin does not dwell on this subject. And yet it is a point
that is open to discussion, for even if it is true that we have no precise
information regarding the audiences, they can hardly be labelled
“educated” indiscriminately. Moreover it is surprising that Bakhtin
fails to notice that in the description he provides of one of the
mainstays of popular culture, the “grotesque body”, there are many
points of contact with the ambivalent image that anatomy offered of
the body: “open”, “revealing its proper substance”, especially in
relation to mating and pregnancy, for ever giving birth or dying.197
Bearing these points in mind, another look at the frontispiece of
Vesalius’ *Fabrica* may be particularly revealing.

Bakhtin’s remarks provide the only adequate framework within
which to account for complex and widespread behaviour such as the
“carnivalized” or at least festive enjoyment and perception of public
anatomy. (At the same time, the documentary evidence regarding
this institution gives further support to his hypothesis.) Further, they
may help to explain those patterns of behaviour referred to above that
share with anatomical ceremonies an attitude of positive complicity
towards the body.

But if these remarks are roughly applicable to the whole of Europe,
one can perhaps go further in the case of Bologna and attempt a
“Bakhtinian” analysis of the way the university institutions responded
to public anatomy lessons. These institutions, in an effort to turn
public anatomy into a spectacular annual event, clearly sought to
exploit the fact that from the sixteenth century onwards — in other
universities too, though it was in Bologna alone that this overlap was
preserved so unswervingly and for so long — the lessons actually
took place during the carnival period. The ban imposed on public
anatomy lessons outside the carnival period, the obligation to com-
plete the anatomy courses by the end of the carnival, the express
permission granted to unknown people in carnival disguise to attend
the lessons, the sumptuous decoration of the theatre and its very
architectural design: all these measures seem to be aimed at keeping
the public anatomy ceremony as magnificent as possible, precisely at
the time at which the prestige of the Studium as a whole was in
jeopardy.

The pontifical authority, as well as the local government, the
chroniclers and the scholars, drew attention to the way in which

the “function” was taken over by the carnival spirit, and showed considerable sensitivity to the profound values of the festivity, which were thereby confirmed and consolidated. Probably the atemporal and indiscriminately “popular” conception of the world that Bakhtin delineates had conscious allies within the ruling institutions and classes. After all, it was these institutions and classes that formed the public to which Rabelais addressed his mocking literary anatomies.

IX

From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, this complex harmony with the dead appears to have disintegrated. Quite apart from the rejection of capital punishment — to begin with on emotive rather than on legal grounds — there arose a certain embarrassment about dissection, a sensitivity which soon developed into a feeling of outright disgust. Here are two examples of this reaction, in statements made by major figures who otherwise had very different backgrounds and interests: Goethe and Rousseau. The former, in his Italian Journey, on arriving in Bologna to see the works of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exponents of the Bolognese school, railed against “the paintings’ almost always absurd subjects, which make us lose our heads, whereas we should like to venerate and love them”. And he goes on:

Whereas the divine genius of Guido Reni and his brush (which should only have portrayed the most perfect of the things that may be seen) arouse your interest, you would like to divert your gaze from certain subjects that are so horribly stupid, that there are no words reproachful enough to condemn them. Over and over again we find ourselves in an anatomy theatre or before a scaffold or in a knacker’s yard: repeatedly we are faced with the torments of the protagonist, never any action, never any present interest . . .

Rousseau, in one of his Réveries, expressed a view based on comparable emotions, regarding in particular the dissection of animals: “What a frightful display an anatomy amphitheatre provides: reeking cadavers, slobbering livid flesh, blood, disgusting intestines, ghastly skeletons, pestilential vapours!”

The creation of great collections and laboratories of anatomical waxworks in the eighteenth century seems in part to be attributable

to the desire to substitute for the crudity of dissection a whole armoury of non-perishable pieces. These had the added advantage of being artistic euphemisms. Giuseppe Galletti, surgeon at the Arcispedale of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, hints at this in a letter about one of his writings: “I treat here of how, under the glorious government of the Great Leopoldo [Pietro Leopoldo di Toscana], the desire to see, without feeling nausea, and at a close range, the various parts of the body by means of wax figures, reawoke”.200 At roughly the same time, very similar observations prompted the decision in France to resort to models in the training of midwives.201 Philippe Ariès maintains that it was in the eighteenth century that the irreparable rupture between the world of the dead and that of the living was actually sealed.202 The literature of horror, the fear of being buried alive and the fear of the exhalations of cadavers all appear to be expressions of the anguish experienced during the age of Enlightenment. The attitude towards dead bodies had completely changed, and a kind of repugnance for everything having to do with death had arisen.203

This change occurred alongside “an advance in the frontiers of shame, in the threshold of repugnance”204 which, in the view of Norbert Elias, also impinged upon social displays of aggressiveness. Such manifestations may be taken to cover also the festive approach to public dissections and executions, which later became “macabre” and “barbaric”. It is this new organization of feelings that can probably best account for the painless death of public anatomy, for, having outlived one by one its educational, promotional and scientific purposes, it no longer had any reason to exist, not even as spectacle.

Giovanna Ferrari