MEDICINAL CANNIBALISM IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND CULTURE

LOUISE NOBLE
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Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture
by Louise Noble
Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture

Louise Noble
Now for these walls of flesh, wherein the soul doth seeme to be immured before the Resurrection, it is nothing but an elementall composition, and a fabricke that must fall to ashes; All flesh is grass, is not onely metaphorically, but literally true, for all these creatures we behold, are but the herbs of the field, digested into flesh in them, or more remotely carnified in our selves. Nay further, we are what we all abhorre, Anthropophagi and Cannibals, devourers not onely of men, but of our selves; and that not in an allegory, but a positive truth; for all this masse of flesh which wee behold, came in at our mouths: this frame wee looke upon, hath beene upon our trenchers; In briefe, we have devoured our selves.

Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici
## Contents

*Series Editors’ Foreword*  
ix  

*Acknowledgments*  
xi  

### Introduction

The Pharmacological Corpse: The Practice and Rhetoric of Bodily Consumptions  
1  

### Chapter 1

The Mummy Cure: Fresh Unspotted Cadavers  
17  

### Chapter 2

Medicine, Cannibalism, and Revenge Justice: *Titus Andronicus*  
35  

### Chapter 3

Flesh Economies in Foreign Worlds: *The Unfortunate Traveller* and *The Sea Voyage*  
59  

### Chapter 4

Divine Matter and the Cannibal Dilemma: *The Faerie Queene* and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*  
89  

### Chapter 5

The *Fille Vièrge* as Pharmakon: *Othello* and the *Anniversaries*  
127  

### Epilogue

Trafficking the Human Body: Late Modern Cannibalism  
161  

*Notes*  
165  

*Works Cited*  
207  

*Index*  
223
Series Editors’ Foreword

In the twenty-first century, literary criticism, literary theory, historiography, and cultural studies have become intimately interwoven, and the formerly distinct fields of literature, society, history, and culture no longer seem so discrete. The Palgrave Early Modern Cultural Studies Series encourages scholarship that crosses boundaries between disciplines, time periods, nations, and theoretical orientations. The series assumes that the early modern period was marked by incipient processes of transculturation brought about through exploration, trade, colonization, and the migration of texts and people. These phenomena set in motion the processes of globalization that remain in force today. The purpose of this series is to publish innovative scholarship that is attentive to the complexity of this early modern world and bold in the methods it employs for studying it.

As series editors, we welcome, for example, books that explore early modern texts and artifacts that bear the traces of transculturation and globalization and that explore Europe’s relationship to the cultures of the Americas, of Europe, and of the Islamic world, and native representations of those encounters. We are equally interested in books that provide new ways to understand the complex urban culture that produced the early modern public theater or that illuminate the material world of early modern Europe and the regimes of gender, religion, and politics that informed it. Elite culture or the practices of everyday life, the politics of state or of the domestic realm, the material book or the history of the emotions—all are of interest if pursued with an eye to novel ways of making sense of the strangeness and complexity of the early modern world.

Jean Howard and Ivo Kamps
Series Editors
For far too long I have worked, slept, and eaten mummy and it is wonderful to finally get it out of my system with *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*. I am determined that my next major project will be about something that does have the potential to trigger reactions of disgust, disbelief, or nervous cannibal jokes. In spite of this, I have relished my fascinating journey through an important part of our medical history and I am pleased to be able to thank all of those who have inspired, assisted, and encouraged me along the way.

I begin with my teachers, Marta Straznicky and Elizabeth Hanson at Queen’s University in Canada. Their passion and dedication inspired me to become an early modern literary scholar and this book owes a great deal to their guidance and support from the beginning. The early encouragement of Michael Neill, Jean Howard, and Jonathan Gil Harris spurred me along, and without the kind prodding of Jean and Gil there might not be a book to celebrate. I am lucky also to have friends and colleagues who have helped me in more ways than they know: here I wish to thank Marta Straznicky, Maggie Berg, Darryl Chalk, Stephen Harris, Cathy Waters, Ron Bedford, Rosemary Williamson, Naama Goren-Inbar, and Judith Berman Kohn.

The idea for this study was first tested in 1998 on the astute audience at the Australian and New Zealand Shakespeare Association conference in Brisbane, and their enthusiastic response showed me that I did, indeed, have a project. During the process, the rare books reading rooms of the British Library, the Wellcome Library, the Huntington Library, the Fischer Library, and the Cambridge University Library provided knowledgeable staff, and an invaluable space for losing myself in well-used medical books. I am particularly indebted to the University of New England, Australia, for the research grant and study leave to spend time in Cambridge, and to Clare Hall for awarding me a research fellowship; at this wonderful college dinner was always a feast of scholarly exchanges. I also owe a deep thanks to the Series Editors, Ivo Kamps and Jean Howard for seeing the value in my work, to the anonymous reader of my manuscript for
their generous comments, and to all at Palgrave Macmillan who have assisted in the various stages of editing and production.

None of this would have been possible without Michael Fox and Zoë Noble Fox. I dedicate this book to these two very special and dear people. Michael has been my rock and my best friend, and this book owes a great deal to his keen editor’s eye, fine intellect, and generous spirit. Zoë has been my biggest fan throughout, and her unfailing belief in me is humbling.

“Make Mummy of my flesh, and sell me to the Apothecaries.”

—James Shirley, *The Bird Cage*

Photograph courtesy of the artist, Zoe Noble Fox, 2010.
Introduction

The Pharmacological Corpse: The Practice and Rhetoric of Bodily Consumptions

Cannibalism is never just about eating but is primarily a medium for nongustatory messages—messages having to do with the maintenance, regeneration, and, in some cases, the foundation of the cultural order.

Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger*

What our druggists are supplied with is the flesh of executed criminals, or of any other bodies the [makers of mummy] can get, who . . . send them to be baked in an oven till the juices are exhaled.

Samuel Johnson, *Johnson’s Dictionary*

Global capitalism, advanced medical and biotechnologies, have incited new tastes and desires for the skin, bone, blood, organs, tissue and reproductive and genetic material of the other.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Bodies for Sale—Whole or in Parts”

Medicinal cannibalism, the medical circulation and consumption of the human body, is part of a long and complex history that continues with the global trafficking of organs and body parts today. This book is about an important moment in that history, during which the early modern English distributed and consumed as medicine the flesh and excretions of the human corpse—frequently described as “mummy” (*mumia*)—sourced from both imported mummified corpses and
recently prepared local corpses. A central tenet of this corpse pharma-
ology is the perception that the human body contains a mysterious
healing power that is transmitted in ingested matter such as mummy.
The pervasive presence of mummy in early modern literature and
drama reveals a cultural fascination, almost to the point of obsession,
with the medical recycling of corpse matter. The main objective of
this book is to attempt to shed light on this fascination through an
exploration of the significance of the medical consumption of corpses
for the early modern cultural imaginary and, inextricably, the religious
implications of this in view of the contested belief in divine
flesh in the Catholic Eucharist. But it would be misleading to attempt
to isolate this recycling of corpses as a product of a single historical
moment, or as a curious glitch in medical history. During my work on
this book, I have been repeatedly reminded of the parallels between
the early modern medical market’s treatment of bodies and what
happens to bodies in today’s global medical market. As we shall see,
traces of those earlier bodies haunt the commodified and fragmented
bodies that circulate in our age. In temporal terms, recycled medical
corpse matter defies synchronization; rather, it is embedded with the
lingerings of corpses of the distant and recent past that flow through
and across time and space in a multitemporal domain. Consequently,
this book does not attempt to map a chronological history of the
medical deployment of the human body. Instead, while the practice
and rhetoric of medicinal cannibalism in early modern England is the
subject of this study, my approach is also concerned with highlighting
the importance this holds for us now.

As is the case in today’s medical economy, the fragmented human
body was a crucial commodity in the business of health in early
modern England. In many ways, the culture is defined by its preoc-
cupation with the ingestible corpse drug mummy, or *mumia*. The
term *mummy* commonly refers to an ancient preserved corpse; how-
ever, the “mummy” that appears repeatedly in early modern literary
texts and plays—for example the mummy in the Witches’ brew in
*Macbeth*—primarily describes medicinal corpse matter. Sixteenth-
and seventeenth-century pharmacopoeias abound with references
to mummy. The term identifies matter procured from both ancient
embalmed bodies, imported from the Middle East for the purpose,
and local bodies, frequently the bodies of executed criminals sen-
tenced to be anatomized and the bodies of those who were socially
disenfranchised. Both forms of mummy and other bodily matter were
important drugs in the pharmacological arsenal and were harvested,
distributed, prescribed, and consumed in a dynamic medical corpse
market. While a small number of corpses were legally anatomized in state-sanctioned anatomies, apothecaries and barber-surgeons were actively involved in the illegal processing of many others. In addition to mummy, bodily matter such as urine, feces, blood, fat, and bone were deployed in the name of health.

The most highly prized mummy was that from a fresh corpse, preferably a youth who had died a sudden and violent death, because of the widespread belief that a swift death captured the body’s healing life force, while a slow death depleted it. The belief that the body’s life force is captured and preserved in death gives mummy an uncanny temporal status that registers the past in the present and reinforces the multitemporality of corpse matter; in fact, mummy only functions medicinally in the present because it is embedded with the trace of a past existence. There is, of course, an uncanny parallel here between the medical ingestion of corpses in Protestant England and the religious ingestion of transubstantiated divine flesh in the disputed Catholic Eucharist. In Catholic theology Christ was often referred to as the great physician whose divine flesh is a sacramental food that can heal all infirmities. While one is administered to treat the disease of the body and the other the disease of the soul—although the soul is also considered the site of corporeal contagion—both reflect the belief that the essence of a past life has pharmacological power when absorbed into a life in the present. The easy resemblances between these different forms of ingestion lend themselves, as I reveal in chapter 4, to post-Reformation cultural fantasies of consuming medicinal flesh that frequently invert to representations of the Catholic sacrament. It comes as no surprise then that for those Reformers who rejected the literality of the Eucharist, mummy appeared attractive, not as an alternative to divine matter, but as a food that mediated a special kind of hunger. Transposed in this way, medical corpse matter functions as a trace of that originary body, the *anima* that has never really been present, except as an already multitemporal trace.

To explore this further, I use two apparently temporally and spatially distant anecdotes to illustrate how the traces of time embedded in mummy actively press up against and speak to the present and the future. On June 27, 1574, a disorderly York crowd witnessed the hanging of Robert de Fleury, George de Abbot, and William de Abbot, “without Micklegate Bar,” for attempted murder. “After the execution,” we are told, “their bodies were given to the surgeons of the city to be dissected and anatomised.” Thus, these three bodies entered the early modern medical corpse market, through which bodies and bodily matter circulated as objects of exchange and consumption,
often ending up processed as mummy. The acquisition of the human body and its vestiges was vital to the business of health in the age, deeply invested as it was not only in plumbing the anatomical secrets of the body’s interior but also in deploying corpse matter for a whole slew of ailments using corpse matter.9 I identify this medical treatment of bodies in the competing network of medical market relations as an early modern form of cannibalism. Four hundred years later, in December 2005, newspaper readers were exposed to a rash of articles about the sale of kidneys harvested from executed Chinese prisoners to British kidney patients needing a transplant.10 This brand of organ harvesting is not, however, an isolated incident in our age; rather, it is just one small component of a market for human corpses that medical anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes as a form of “late modern cannibalism”: the highly lucrative and evolving transnational traffic in human bodies, parts, and organs for medical transplantation purposes that is caught up in the investment and technology of the twenty-first century global economy.11 The difference, however, is that while we do have some idea of the destiny of the harvested organs of Chinese criminals, the fate of the anatomized bodies of the sixteenth-century criminals remains a mystery.

These two examples illustrate how what happens to bodies in today's medical market is one moment, albeit a highly organized and sophisticated one, in a long historical continuum in which the human body and its products are exchanged and distributed in a complex medical economy. Thus, the significance of the late modern medicalized body is perplexed by traces of the early modern pharmacological corpse.12 With its capacity to disturb and disrupt time—in fact, in this multitemporality there occurs an overlapping and a pushing back—medical corpse matter functions similarly to the bog bodies of Irish literature, which Anthony Purdy describes as having “the ability to compress time and to render the past visible in the present.”13 In these terms, if matter can compress then it can also expand time and bring the present in touch with the future. Thus, the time of corpse matter is elastic. It challenges linearity and is both in and out of its time, occupying a temporal and spatial position that is, to borrow Jonathan Gil Harris’s term, “untimely.” For Harris, in certain circumstances, matter “assume[s] a . . . dialogic relation to the present, suggesting affinity and proximity rather than difference and distance between elements of then and now.” Matter is thus “temporally out of step with itself and its moment,” and Harris urges us to heed “the multiple traces of time embedded in things . . . [that] play an active role in the present object.”14 Harris’s notion of the untimely is particularly helpful for
understanding the temporal and spatial dynamics of corpse matter. As an object of medical use and abuse over time, the human body has been ascribed meaning and value according to shifting practices and relations, needs and desires, supplies and scarcities, beliefs and speculations. This easily lends itself to a linear tracing. Yet Harris’s analysis of the temporality of matter and things gives us another way to think about this, particularly given that the matter being discussed is the human body. Within pharmacological corpse matter there is a temporal lingering that permeates today’s medicalized bodies. In these terms, corpse matter can simultaneously both be and not be part of a historical moment; yet for the purpose of this study it must be recognized as also existing in its own time and space—its “is” if you will.

_Medicinal Cannibalism_ examines the shifting temporality of medical corpse matter during the period in which de Fleury and the de Abbot brothers met their death, in an attempt to shed some light on the significance of mummy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. This book originated with a curiosity about mummy, piqued by the provocative lines in John Donne’s odd little poem, “Love’s Alchemy”: “Hope not for mind in women; at their best / Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed.” In the following chapters, I investigate the medical significance of mummy and the powerful early modern English conviction—also a Catholic conviction—that the human body holds a mysterious healing potency, transmitted through ingestion and absorption, as well as the attractiveness of this idea for the literary imagination. So, in many ways, this book is as much about the power of literature as about medicinal cannibalism and how early modern writers understood the medical corpse market. At one level, the idea that nothing is sacred and everything is for sale has driven the medical commercialization of bodies over time. At a deeper level, however, the efficacy of these markets depends on an enduring belief that the human body is a powerful source of medicine. It is this conviction that makes the use or consumption of a corpse palatable rather than an act of defilement. Otherwise, as Julia Kristeva argues, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection.” My exploration of the early modern investment in this belief begins with the science of corpse pharmacology: a form of medicine that involves the procuring, processing, trading, and ingesting of the human body and its products for healing purposes. I trace the early modern medical corpse, not to establish the identity of those whose bodies were processed as medicine—an impossible task—but to shed some light on the practice and discourse of
Medicinal Cannibalism

corpse pharmacology and its broader ideological and metaphorical constructs that we see in the works discussed.

It is no coincidence that writers such as Shakespeare should interpret and understand the multiple significances of corpse matter and take advantage of its figurative suggestiveness. When Sir Toby threatens to “eat the rest of th’ anatomy,” he invokes the imagery of the potential fate of anatomized bodies in the medical corpse market: being processed and consumed as “drugs.” While we can only speculate on the post-dissection fate of de Fleury and the de Abbot brothers, it is not inconceivable that their remains circulated as the specially prepared ingestible corpse drug imagined by Sir Toby and described in Oswald Croll’s recipe:

Chuse the Carcase of a red Man (because in them the blood is more sincere, and gentle and therefore more excellent) whole (not maimed) clear without blemishes, of the age of twenty four years, that hath been Hanged, Broke upon a Wheel, or Thrust-through, having been for one day and night exposed to the open Air, in a serene time. This Mumy (that is, Musculous flesh, of the Thighs, Breasts, Armes, and other parts) from the two Luminaries, once illuminate and constellate, cut into small pieces or slices and sprinkle on them Powder of Myrrh, and of Aloes, but a very little (otherwise it will be too bitter) afterward by Macerating, Imbibe them for certain days in Spirit of Wine, hang them up a little, and again imbibe them, then hang them up to dry in the Air, this so dried will be like Flesh hardned in Smoak, and be without stink.

Croll’s formula effectively encapsulates many of the exemplars of early modern corpse pharmacology, which I set out in detail in chapter 1. He adopts a well-established therapeutic model that subscribes to the medical superiority of the human corpse and valorizes the ingestion of mummy—specially prepared human flesh, as well as blood, fat, bone, and bodily excretions—for therapeutic purposes. When we read this passage it is easy to see why the early moderns might have approached the use of mummy with squeamishness; however, the widespread use of corpse medicine suggests that for many this was easily overcome. What is particularly interesting about this passage is the technical nature of the language. Any attempt to sensationalize the cannibalistic imagery is foiled by the matter-of-factness of Croll’s words, which portray corpse pharmacology as unexceptional. This points to the fact that, while on the one hand the medical consumption of human flesh may have been unsettling, on the other hand it made perfect sense. In a culture grasping for answers to the mysteries of the body and its illnesses, and in
the absence of reliable medical knowledge and treatments, the human corpse seemed replete with curative potential; the seductive idea of its efficacy endured well beyond the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Croll’s practical, scientific approach sets the tone for *Medicinal Cannibalism*. It would be easy to sensationalize the material on which this book dwells, to adopt a position of cultural superiority and to isolate corpse pharmacology as a fascinating, although ultimately rather barbaric and distasteful—perhaps even slightly amusing—glitch in Western medical history. But this would reveal more about twenty-first-century preconceptions and vulnerabilities than it would about attitudes of the time toward the medical deployment of the body. The new historicist literary scholar is repeatedly drawn into the challenge of what appears as the inscrutability of the past. We are in many ways victims of epistemological seduction, of a pressing need to make sense of what seems unfamiliar and strange in literary texts, texts that we imagine mediate and thus—when sufficiently probed—reveal the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of people of the past living within a particular cultural moment. The desire to recover what seems coded and indecipherable from a distant time and space is frequently tweaked by our desire to master what we do not fully understand. Robert Darnton suggests that

> We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock…. When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning.

However, in the end, is the past really so foreign? Or is its foreignness a product of our own desire—a masquerade of our own making and a burden we place on history?

There seems to be in what we do an element of what Fredric Jameson identifies as an aesthetic of “defamiliarization (estrangement), in which a stereotype is dismantled and brought before us in all its nameless freshness and horror.” While Jameson focuses on recycling representations of war in various guises, he offers a useful way to think about the idea of dismantling and re-presenting the familiar (today’s global trade in body parts) as shocking and new (parallel practices in the past). Whether we are conscious of this or not, our excavation of the past has the potential to shed some light on the present—if we grasp where we came from perhaps we can understand who and where we are. Do we really understand this or do we neatly
attempt to consign what we find to the time and space of “then”—what Harris calls “the national sovereignty model of temporality”?

If we pay attention, the meaning we seek from the past frequently emerges as weirdly familiar, and we are surprised by the subterfuge of history. This is the case in this study. As suggested above, there are similarities and convergences between the circumstances, procurement, and treatment of bodies in the early modern medical corpse market and those in today’s global medical markets. This temporal plurality arises at different points throughout the book; I return to it in more detail at the end.

The identification of corpse pharmacology as a form of early modern cannibalism is a rhetorical strategy—as is Scherper-Hughes’s use of “late modern cannibalism” mentioned above. In a frequently quoted statement, Marshall Sahlins makes the point that “cannibalism is always ‘symbolic’ even when it is ‘real’.” Sahlins’s statement highlights the contested meaning of these terms; however, the point—albeit a slightly slippery one—that cannibalism is always both symbolic and real holds for all forms of eating. The purpose here is not to venture into the well-covered argument of what constitutes cannibalism, or who is or is not a cannibal, but rather to draw attention to the cannibalistic nature of a medical practice that depends on the violated, manipulated, fragmented, processed, circulated, marketed, and consumed human body, made possible by a culture that witnessed public displays of violent executions and bloody anatomies. In this context the early modern body gains significance and value not as an entity but as its various parts, producing “a cannibalism that selectively nibbles.” Of course, in terms of what seems brutal to us about the past, there is much that is alive and well in our own age; indeed, as is the case today, while the early modern medical deployment of the human corpse was seen as cannibalistic, it was not necessarily identified as savage cannibalism per se. This is certainly the distinction Michel de Montaigne makes regarding what constitutes true cannibalistic behavior in his essay “On Cannibals,” in which he considers corpse pharmacology as a tolerable, even admirable, form of cannibalism because it is practiced in the name of health. Yet discourses of cannibalism cannot be easily separated from the possibility of the practice of cannibalism. As Gananath Obeyesekere argues:

[D]iscourse is not just speech; it is imbedded in a historical and cultural context and expressed often in the frame of a scenario or cultural performance. It is about practice: the practice of . . . cannibalism. Insofar as discourse evolves it begins to affect the practice.
In this study, therefore, medicinal cannibalism is understood as a rhetorical figure produced by the discourse and practice of corpse pharmacology. As this book reveals, the cannibalistic suggestiveness of the medical corpse provided creative fuel for imaginative cultural reworking. Furthermore, corpse matter is itself a repository of meaning open for interpretation. In particular, social, religious, and scientific uses of corpse matter reveal much about the attitudes and values of the world in which it is deployed. By constructing the medical violation and consumption of human bodies as a desirable practice, early modern medical discourse offers a complex understanding of what it means for one human to consume the body of another. Corpse pharmacology constituted socially sanctioned ingestion of the human body, and the cannibalistic imagery produced by the medical treatment and deployment of corpses provided a useful tool for the early modern literary imagination. The attractiveness and effectiveness of cannibal imagery has much to do with its resemblance to the cannibal act itself. Embedded in competing discourses of cannibalism—symbolically suggestive as they are—is the prospect of the literal: that there are, somewhere in the world, humans who eat other humans.

This is what gives the discourse of cannibalism its rhetorical power. Our perennial fascination with the cannibal acts of people such as—in our own age—Jeffrey Dahmer and Armin Meiwes speaks to the seductiveness of the idea of humans eating other humans. On the one hand we find these actions gruesome and hard to comprehend, but on the other hand we have an almost pathological need to believe that such behavior occurs; thus, these acts serve as evidence that the threat lurking behind the rhetoric is very real. The imagery of cannibalism has a long history as a durable form of cultural mediation already saturated with a highly nuanced range of iterative possibilities effective for exploring a range of human appetites, behaviors, and emotions. As this study shows, the healing corpse gave early modern writers an even more potent set of images with which to work, frequently resulting in a crisscrossing of discourses and desires that cannot be neatly distinguished.

“AND I THE MATTER WILL REWORD”:
THE MATTER OF METAPHOR

*With memory, with the reflection of an echo, a gate opens both ways. We can circle time. A paragraph or an episode from another era will haunt us in the night, as the words of a stranger can.*

Michael Ondaatje, *Divisadero*
As those of old drunk mummia
To fire their limbs of lead,
Making dead kings from Africa
Stand pandar to their bed;
Drunk on the dead, and medicined
With spiced imperial dust,
In a short night they reeled to find
Ten centuries of lust
So I, from paint, stone, tale and rhyme,
Stuffed love’s infinity,
And sucked all lovers of all time
To rarefy ecstasy.

Rupert Brooke, “Mummia”

The dynamic of metaphor... ...on the perception of resemblance.

Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor

When Hamlet offers to “reword,” to represent, “the matter,” he figures the matter—Gertrude’s diagnosis of his psychological state as a form of madness—as a physical disease: “It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen.” These words highlight not only the power of metaphor but also the figurative and ideological potential of medical corpse matter. If the meaning of rhetorical figures depends on language, which all cultures use to make sense of their experiences and give form to their ideas, then Hamlet’s offer to reword the matter tells us something about the ability of figurative language to mediate, contradict, and disturb the familiar. Here, Shakespeare draws our attention to the ideological significance of figurative language in its power to constitute the social and political—including how we understand our relationships to and in the world—and also to destabilize these constructions to produce a new set of coherences. Michel Foucault identifies this as “a plastic continuity, the movement of a meaning that is embodied in various representations, images and metaphors.” In other words, these disturbances themselves are the “organizing principle” of figurative language. We constitute our world figuratively; the tensions, fissures, and paradoxes created by competing figurations in literary texts, and the beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, fears, and desires of the world in which these texts are produced are deeply implicated in one another. Like corpse matter, figurative language is at once in and out of time. As Cynthia Ozick nicely puts it, “Through metaphor, the past
has the capacity to imagine us, and we it.”37 I do not think that Ozick is setting up a linear progression of metaphor here; rather, she sees a figurative temporality in which the metaphorical associations, comparisons, and resemblances of the past seep into and out of those of the present.38 In his discussion of matter, Harris posits the question: “What, in short, is the time of the thing?”39 We can also ask this question of figurative language. With history at its center, the figurative exemplifies language itself, registering its diachronic tracings as well as the moment-by-moment events and circumstances in which it is caught up and through which it moves and transforms. As a repository of the past that speaks to the present and the future, the imagery of corpse matter functions as a temporal field of force, just as matter itself does.

The idea of the lingerings of time embedded in matter is particularly compelling when considered in relation to the human body. Today, this is best exemplified by the Genographic Project, which has begun charting humanity’s family tree and migration patterns over the last sixty thousand years using DNA testing.40 Through genome mapping, it is possible to uncover the body’s hereditary and geographical story: this is matter at its untimeliest. Bruno Latour ponders this in his discussion of humans as “exchangers and brewers of time.” “Some of my genes,” Latour points out “are 500 million years old, others 3 million, others 100,000 years and my habits range in age from a few days to several thousand years.”41 Furthermore, here the human body is not simply matter for metaphor; rather, it is matter as metaphor that figures its ancestry through and across time and space. This is what Shakespeare is trying to get at in “Sonnet 53” with his question: “What is your substance, whereof are you made / That millions of strange shadows on you tend?”42 In a sense, the genome-mapped body is similar to the dissected body; it reveals—albeit through a substantially less physically invasive process—what lies within. If corpse matter is considered metaphorically, then its ingestion constitutes the incorporation of the descent and atlas of humanity.43 I argue that the early modern English writers understood the significance of corpse matter in its capacity to interrupt, overlap, and push back against temporality and spatiality. They also realized its effectiveness at representing the complexities of human identity and behavior. To “eat the rest of th’ anatomy,” as Sir Toby threatens, evokes not only dissection and corpse pharmacology but also the consumption of Sir Andrew’s genetic makeup—his DNA in fact.

In these terms then, mummy articulates themes of the past and the present, manifesting a plethora of images associated with the
Medicinal Cannibalism

12

treatment and consumption of the human body. The range of figurai-
tive possibilities for mummy is far-reaching and includes embalmed
Middle Eastern bodies, recently preserved European bodies, exe-
cuted bodies, violated bodies, anatomized bodies, medicalized bod-
ies, commodified bodies, fetishized bodies, and eroticized bodies, to
name a few. While not the main focus of my study, the discussion of
time in relation to matter and metaphor is important because it illus-
trates that what we learn from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century
medical corpse and its representations has implications for how we
understand the medical use of the human body in our own age and
into the future. Further, it encourages a way of thinking about matter
and metaphor, and about matter as metaphor, that moves them out
of a particular historical moment into a multitemporal domain that
expands the parameters of interpretation. The subject of this book
should not be seen as a historical anomaly, nor should today’s practice
be seen as a natural or inevitable progression. Instead, the point is
that the bodily matter of today’s global medical trade is alive with
traces of those from the past and will itself form the residue of the
future.

Furthermore, the practice of corpse pharmacology in early modern
England adds an extra dimension to how we might interpret repre-
sentations of the violated body. Rhetoric of the day that describes the
treatment of bodies resonate with, and is in fact implicated in prac-
tice, in what was actually done to bodies. Corpse pharmacology is an
important aspect of this figurative milieu and needs to be considered,
along with other forms of bodily abuse such as torture and execution,
as part of the suggestive range of violated and exploited bodies.
In her discussion of metaphor, Ozick writes that “no cast of mind is
more surrendered to the figurative than the namers of organs.”44 This
statement can be broadened to embrace the notion that no language
is more easily relinquished to the figurative than that describing the
body in its relation to and at the mercy of medicine. Given the range of
possibilities, nothing appears to work more powerfully on the imagi-
nation than the spectrum of what can be done to the body in the
name of medicine; thus, in instances of such rhetoric, the idea of the
body as potential medicine is often not far away. This is particularly
the case when describing heinous behavior by negative stereotypes,
such as the figure of the treacherous, cannibalistic Jew. We see this in
A Christian Turn’d Turke, for example, which builds metaphorically
the relationship between Jewishness, bodily violations, revenge, and
medicine to the point when Rabshake declares, “If you gull me now,
I’l give you leave to make mummy of me.”45 Here Rabshake’s words
imagine the worst fate possible for him—his body processed into an ingestible drug.

What comes next in this book is an account of the ways in which several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers read, understand, and represent corpse pharmacology and its cannibalistic implications, a practice that is, as I show, inescapably caught up in processes of social disenfranchisement, judicial violence, scientific experimentation, and religious reform. In the end, literature is at the center of my book and I have chosen literary texts that best exemplify how different writers recognize the force and potential of the imagery of medicinal cannibalism across a range of genres and preoccupations. I am interested in the terrains writers traverse in search of their metaphors and what this imagery produces. To this end, while I discuss some works in their entirety, with others I focus on a single episode in order to show how medical corpse matter lends persuasive energy to efforts to engage with a range of social, cultural, and political issues such as political corruption, rules of commerce, religious conflict, anti-Semitism, eroticism, and female chastity. In terms of the belief in therapeutic corpse matter, there appears to be a secular and religious consensus. In the following pages, I examine the powerful imagery produced by the idea of the healing corpse and its ingestion. This particular imagery registers widely, not only through the multiple complexities of the medicalized corpse but also the Catholic doctrine of the salvific powers of ingested divine matter in the Eucharist sacrament. Moreover, while I do not do this with all the texts examined, in relevant places I discuss the role of genre and the formal engagements of a text to show the importance of form to a literary text’s ideological persuasiveness.46

The basis of my argument, that early modern culture was deeply invested in the medicinal benefits of recycled flesh, is presented in chapter 1, which describes the medical corpse industry in early modern England that underwrites the intricate figurative play between the salvific consumption of human corpse matter and cannibalistic eating in the literary texts I discuss. Building on the long medical tradition of using the human body for healing purposes, numerous early modern pharmacopoeias offer recipes that contain mummy, human body parts, and excretions prescribed for a vast range of ailments. This practice, which initially deployed preserved bodies from the Middle East, is perplexed by formulas such as Croll’s for preserving European bodies and raises the issues that this chapter attempts to clarify: Whose bodies were turned into mummy? How were they acquired? How were they processed? How were they traded?
Corpse pharmacology occurs within and, as chapter 1 argues, is facilitated by a culture of corporal punishment driven by a logic of justice through revenge: criminals are punished for the good of the state. The added punishment of dissection that we see in the sentencing of de Fleury and the de Abbot brothers reflects this thinking. There is a strong parallel between this judicial theory of revenge and the raison d'être of revenge-tragedy drama. Chapter 2 develops the notion that, in Titus Andronicus, the revenge-tragedy form provides Shakespeare with a literary space appropriate to his task of exploring a revenge-justice rationalization wherein human bodies are consumed—sacrificed and eaten—for the good of the state. In a play in which seemingly irrational acts of revenge violence are in fact ordered based on a cool logic of medical justice and performed as a form of corpse pharmacology, the desire to turn enemies into corpse drugs emerges as a potent form of revenge. Indeed the play brings the imagery and preoccupations of revenge tragedy’s past into its cultural present. This is particularly the case with the cannibal denouement, a literary motif that has, as this account argues, a long literary history as a remedy for human corruption and political infection. The epigraph above, in which Peggy Reeves Sanday says that the symbolic function of cannibalism has always had more to do with cultural wellbeing than with eating, has particular relevance for this chapter.

The business of health participated in a flesh economy wherein the human body, its excretions, and its parts had currency as consumable items in a competitive market driven by various needs. The practice and rhetoric of this market comes freighted with imagery of the human body as an object of exchange and consumption. For many, the medical market in corpses must have seemed rapacious—certainly this was the opinion of French Surgeon Ambroise Paré, who describes those involved in the medical corpse trade as “men wondrous audacious, and covetous”—and it is inevitable that a commercial system that fragments and commodifies the body should produce metaphors of cannibalism. Chapter 3 examines the different understandings and iterations of this imagery in Thomas Nashe’s The Unfortunate Traveller and John Fletcher and Philip Massinger’s The Sea Voyage, two works that provide insight on the erotic and spiritual suggestiveness of the corpse trade and its value for representing instances of social and political injustices and greed. In my discussion, I consider the form and function of prose fiction and tragicomedy as crucial to the cultural engagement and persuasive potential of these two texts.

There is a logical progression of thought from considering the medical capacity of the ingested human body to the Catholic belief