Introduction

The essays in this volume explore the male body as the locus of intersecting social, political, cultural, and bio-medical discourses. Sometimes that body is sited within, and acts from, the position of patriarchal privilege, but more often these essays investigate how it works counter to any such cohesive location. It emerges as a damaged figure: diseased, deconstructed and often failing to perform. The resulting friction between what is and what is expected produces readings that interrogate male embodiment across private and public spheres in which the body is rarely the actant determining its own reading; rather it is acted upon by a series of epistemological and disciplinary practices that variously re-orientate its identity within and against versions of medical knowledge.

What is often surprising about the male bodies we find in medicine and literature is that they rarely enjoy what Simone de Beauvoir called the status of the ‘first sex’. The focus of her feminist study *The Second Sex* (1949) was, of course, the position of women as defined, not in terms of themselves, but as relative to man. Yet her view suggests something of men’s bodies that is very difficult to substantiate:

Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of a woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. ‘The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,’ said Aristotle; ‘we should regard the female nature as afflicted with natural defectiveness’.¹
As will be demonstrated in the essays that follow, there is plenty of historical evidence that men’s anatomies have been considered as no less of a ‘hindrance’ than women’s. At no point in history, indeed, has man been allowed to forget his glands: they have been celebrated by the Ancient Greeks, lamented by early Christians, studied by the Victorians, and subjected to various enhancement practices in the twenty-first century. Still, we would not wish to argue that ways of looking at male and female bodies have been the same throughout history. Where the latter have indeed been viewed as inherently flawed and periodically unwell, the former has been elevated to a position of efficiency that has been no less problematic. In The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private (1999) Susan Bordo writes that the larger phallus has come to stand for a ‘generic male superiority’ over women, other men, and other species. As such, the desire for larger penises has been disguised, through advertising, pornography, television, and books, as a need to ‘measure up’ – to fall in with certain expectations of modernity’s scopic fetishism. In the past, Angus McLaren adds, ‘patriarchal power’ depended upon a man’s ability to produce male heirs; the fate of an entire dynasty would thus rest on the ‘normal functioning’, or even the bare existence, of a penis. Such pressure explains why, according to McLaren, impotence has been a focus of anxiety and resultant medical attention since ancient times. It also explains why erectile dysfunction treatments, along with penis enhancement products, have become multi-billion-pound industries: the need to maintain dynasties might not be as pressing in the West as it once was, but the pressure to perform, to live up to the standard of male virility and power in the post-Fordist era of reproductive efficiency, is just as coercive.
Another interesting thing about representations of the male body in Western cultures is the way in which this myth of a God-given power and privilege has been brought into conflict with the empirical method. With the advent of Renaissance humanism, there arose the desire to see with what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have called 'blind sight', seeing ‘without interference, interpretation or intelligence’. Benjamin A. Rifkin, Michael J. Ackerman and Judith Folkenberg note that, with regards to human anatomy, it was Leonardo da Vinci who led the way to a new standard of accurate perception. He understood that

to be useful, an anatomical drawing need[ed] to be as objectively literal as possible [...]. Leonardo the scientist seems to have found an artistic solution for medical illustration [...]. Stripped of the flourishes of an improvising pen, the anatomies are spare outlines with dry, mechanical hatching, form without atmospheric context.

One of da Vinci’s notebooks features a cross-sectional drawing of a couple in coition (fig. 1). It focuses mainly on the male body and uses the spare outlines and mechanical hatchings identified by Rifkin et al. It also commits a number of errors which are only partly explained by the fact that most of da Vinci’s dissections were performed on bovine subjects; indeed, da Vinci’s most revealing errors are likely to be the result of the way his drawings represented the coming together of two conflicting ways of looking at the male body. On the one hand, we have the aim to be objective identified by Rifkin et al, yet, on the other hand, we have assumptions that biology must represent, in some form or other, man’s link with God and his superiority over other forms of life.
Da Vinci shows the penis as having two urethras – a result, according to David M. Friedman, of ‘how Church dogma was still trumping science’: it was necessary to separate urine (‘thought by the Church to be entirely polluting’) and semen (‘the source of a new human soul’). Da Vinci also drew an artery between the testicles and the heart, thus confirming what he saw to be the connections between the operations of a man’s reproductive organs and the seat of his moral and spiritual
strength. The drawing demonstrates how, at the dawn of modern medicine, the desire for objectivity with regards to the male body was brought into conflict with traditional beliefs about man’s divine privilege.

One hundred years later, Andreas Vesalius’s painstaking dissections, combined with the naturalistic style of his illustrator Jan Stefan van Kalkar, produced what was, up until then, the most accurate atlas of the human anatomy: *De Fabrica Corporis Humanis* (1543). ‘By deflating the religious rhetoric’, Friedman observes, ‘by focusing on form not function – Vesalius’s *Fabrica* took the giant step forward that Leonardo da Vinci planned to take but never completed’. The woodcuts produced by van Kalkar ‘greatly advanced the capacity of printed images to provide identical information that could be reviewed simultaneously anywhere, a founding tenet of modern scientific method’. And yet, in spite of its extraordinary realism, Vesalius’s work also fell short of the standards of objectivity towards which that future anatomists would aim. One illustration from the atlas (fig. 2) demonstrates how Vesalius insisted upon reproducing the Christian view that the body was a connection between man and God. Here a flayed male body, looking and pointing upwards, experiences some spiritual rapture while displaying the handiwork of his deity. It is a depiction that has more in common with Michelangelo’s decoration of the Sistine Chapel than it does with modern anatomical textbooks. The bodies in *De Fabrica Corporis Humanis* are ‘all too sentient’, according to Rifkin et al, ‘their mortality seems all too real, too accurately drawn, to be other than human’.9
Later anatomists believed, however, that being human required more in the way of flesh and bone rather than transcendent fervour. When he produced his *Anatomia Humani Corporis* (1685) French anatomist Govard Bidloo sought to correct Vesalius’s mistakes by drawing attention to the material, often disgusting, qualities of the human body. He tried to ‘erase the ideal

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*Figure 2: Andreas Vesalius’ *De Corporis Humani Fabrica* (Cole Library, University of Reading)*
preconceptions [...] he drew his specimens [...] nailed to the dissecting table, the spikes clearly visible. In one illustration, the reader’s attention was drawn to the penis by a housefly walking on the corpse’. Writing just about the penis, but in a way that might be applied to the whole anatomical structure, Friedman adds, ‘it was drawn not as the flawless work of the master sculptor – God – but as it is in real life: mutable and asymmetrical; not as spirit, as flesh’.¹⁰

The Renaissance anatomists’ attempts to create an objective rationalisation of the male body inaugurated a conflict that all subsequent medical authors have been forced to engage – some more directly than others: how does the wish to study, enhance and treat the body collide with an ingrained, cultural view of man as superior? How do moments when he is wounded, inactive, infectious, or dead, interact with the myth that, of all living organisms, he is strongest? And if the belief in the ‘divine right of man’ is no longer viable in our post-Darwinian world, how has the male body sought to retain its superiority in other ways, not least with the aid of medical science? The essays presented in this volume suggest that the links between literature and medicine are crucial to tackling questions such as these. As the narratives of science have become increasingly closed off to the uninitiated, the literary and historical work involved in looking at how medicine interacts with the various cultures to which it has belonged will help us identify and explore the implications of medical research and health practice. In what follows we have shaped the contributors’ work into three dominant strands, though we would not wish to reduce any chapter to the sum of a simplistic organisational logic. The three main focal points are: the male body as the site of enquiry or experimentation; the wounded or psychopathologized body; and the male body
as transmitter of fear, confusion, or contagion. In each of these areas, the male body emerges through and against literary traditions in order to justify, unsettle, or repudiate the mythology of the superior male. Across a wide range of authors, time periods and genres, literary texts are shown to be in search for ways of developing meanings around bodies, and in so doing expose the complex ways in which medicine has shaped, and been shaped by, cultural ideas of masculinity. Moreover, literature becomes a crucial arbiter between the epistemology of medicine and the experiential lives of men.

Jamie McKinstry's essay 'The Poetics of Anatomy: John Donne's Dissection of the Male Body' might be seen to most specifically address the notion of the body as a site of detailed and conflicted enquiry. In it he examines the early modern history of anatomical dissection as an exploratory process of formalizing knowledge and of encountering the unexpected within. The sixteenth-century journey inside the body has parallels, McKinstry argues, with the contemporaneous exploration of the New World, and in Donne's poetry he sees reflected a linked throwing-off of ignorance and an embracing of new physical metaphors. Donne’s work demonstrates clear knowledge of the interior workings of the body, alongside a desire to claim ownership of this new territory. But if dissection allowed Donne a powerful metaphorical licence for colonizing the body’s interiority, it does not fully satisfy the spirit of investigative empiricism, for the viscera do not account for the immaterial drives for love and against death. Nor can they position the soul with any accuracy. Ultimately this dialectic between the physical and the metaphysical prompts deeper questions than science is able to answer, but it initiates, for McKinstry, modernity's epistemological challenge.
The search for blind sight, or seeing without prejudice, is exposed as a
fantasy nowhere more striking than in the intersections between ideas of race
and science. As Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth have observed:

Racial theory in nineteenth-century ethnography and
anthropology adapted and reinterpreted the debate between
contrasting eighteenth-century explanations of physical and
cultural difference and human origin. [...] The growing obsession
with measuring and classifying physical characteristics played a
key part in the re-emergence of the polygenist preoccupation with
difference and type, reframed within evolutionary theories of
descent, turning, and crucially, on the concept of hybridity.11

Despite all its weighing and measuring, the science of racial difference, hybridity,
and cross-fertilisation, was distorted by traditional prejudices every bit as
persuasive as da Vinci’s links between the body and religion. In her essay ‘The
Black Male Body in Early African American Science Fiction: The Experimental
Case of Sutton Griggs’s Imperium in Imperio’ (1899), Marlene D. Allen explores
the bodies of Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave through the focus of late-
nineteenth-century debates about race determinism. Imperium in Imperio
extrapolates the nature and nurture dichotomy into a fantastical counter-history
of race war in America to refute pseudo-scientific discourses of black intellectual
inferiority. Griggs displays a hardening white prurience over the black body born
of increasingly divisive essentialist doctrines of the taintedness of black blood. At
the same time he details a fascination with the difference of the black body, a
fascination that turns towards appropriation in striking scenes where Belton,
dressed as a woman, is sexually assaulted by a group of white men, and where,
after being lynched and assumed dead, his body is handed to a white doctor for
dissection. Such violations reflect for Allen a satirical attack on a scientific
partiality that seeks in the passive black body the justification for its own racist
presumptions. Experimentation and empirical enquiry is not free from the cultural biases that legitimize it, and, for Griggs, this can lead only to the misreading of the black body.

Where for McKinstry and Allen the male body acts as a locus for interpretation through experimentation, in Katherine Angell’s ‘Miserrimus Dexter: Monstrous Forms of the Fin de Siècle’, it is characterised by impenetrability. Her essay focuses on the ‘monstrous’ deformities of Miserrimus Dexter in Wilkie Collins’ *The Law and the Lady* (1875) and their framing within the Victorian interest in teratology – the study of genital birth defects. Born without legs, Dexter is a taxonomical conundrum, positioned somewhere between subject and object, and between madness and knowledge. His deformity is, as Angell makes clear, the object of scientific investigation, but it must also be interpreted in order to resolve the mystery at the heart of the novel’s plot. For the truth to be unearthed, Dexter must be read and analysed, to the extent that he becomes one of the specimens on which the light of classification is directed. His hybridity, his indeterminacy, too threatening to medical – not to mention social – discourse, must ultimately be framed within and through the teratological monstrosities with which he is associated. The dangerous knowledge that he possesses, which as much concerns his deformed body as the key to the novel’s mystery, threatens to exceed the symbolic order and thereby render questionable the ordering principles of science and medicine.

Christine Crockett Sharp's “‘Intellectual Suicides”: The Man of Letters in *Middlemarch*’ addresses the body as afflicted by the search for knowledge, and more particularly afflicted by a kind of debilitating investment in the uncovering of truth that runs against the healthful doctrine of Victorian muscular
masculinity, which demands the externalisation and profitable utilisation of libidinal energies. As Hall, Wetherall-Dickson, and Long will do later in this volume, Sharp establishes the sexualised male body as a focus of economic rather than personal concern, part of a system of normalizing physical interrelations that correspond to the salubrious circulation of capital in the wider economy. The introverted, narcissistic self-fulfilment that characterises Casaubon’s quest for mythological confluence repudiates this wholesome logic of exchange and attracts the kind of opprobrious condemnation that the Victorians reserved for autoerotic ‘self-pollution’. Masturbation, Sharp demonstrates, provoked horror in the nineteenth-century mind because of its association with a deliberate self-incapacitation. The weakness and impotence that it was believed to induce, allied to its suspiciousness as a solitary pursuit, runs counter to the imperatives underpinning imperial and commercial vigour. Casaubon is an etiolated husk of a man not primarily because of the impossibility of his intellectual task, but because of his self-inflicted moral wound.

If the male body is an intriguing site of investigative attention in these essays, such might be due in part to the openness, malleability, and brittleness that our contributors read into it. Against medical attempts to read the body are literary representations of bodies exposed to interpretation as examples of wounded masculinity, divested of any trappings of authority or self- or externally-imposed coherence. For Kaminsky, Parui, and Runia, this wounding bridges mental and corporeal functions, but for Sarah Parker, the damage is a literal and ecstatic manifestation of openness. ‘The Male Wound in Fin de Siècle Poetry’ fixes on the figure of Saint Sebastian as the ‘icon for the literally and metaphorically penetrable male body in the late nineteenth century’, (p.***).
Parker regards him as a focus for the aesthetic and decadent impulses of the *fin de siècle*, particularly appealing to non-heteronormative sexualities, but also as a contrasting exemplum for degeneration discourse. Sebastian’s prevalence in the literature of the late-nineteenth century, Parker argues, codifies a nascent aesthetics of homosexual suffering, at the same time offering a provocative metaphorisation of sodomitic activity. It further articulates same-sex relationships with the religious tradition of suffering, producing strikingly eroticized poetry that fantasizes about penetrating the wounds not only of Sebastian, but also of Christ. The wound in this sense is transformational and ecstatic creating a purifying effect, but for the next three essays in the collection, wounding is far from purgative.

In ‘The Cacophony of Disaster: The Metaphorical Body of Sound in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*’, Inbar Kaminsky examines the physical dislocations that follow the emotional trauma of 9/11. Robbed of his ability to process the monumental collapse of meaning represented by the attack, DeLillo’s protagonist is projected into what Kaminsky terms a ‘metaphorical body of sound’ – a dissonant and omnipresent soundscape of memories whose refractions prevent him from accommodating his trauma both physically and mentally. Here the body becomes consumed by the sensorium, dispersed and fractured by the disconnect created by the possibility of survivorship in the midst of mass death. The vaporization of so many bodies in the ruins of the Twin Towers correlates with the spectral corporeality of the survivors thrown into a world of living-after but with nothing but the overwhelmed senses to try to embody their experiences. Structurally as well as thematically, DeLillo creates a text trapped by its inability to incorporate the trauma of 9/11 within the narrative of
American exceptionalism, suggesting that the nation, as much as its citizens has become disembodied, and is still searching for ways to reconnect to the physical weight of history.

Post-traumatic stress is also the subject of Avishek Parui’s essay ““Human Nature is Remorseless”: Masculinity, Medical Science and Nervous Conditions in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway’. For Parui the male body emerges in Woolf’s novel as ‘the site where the biopolitical gaze enacts its corrective measures and its heavy-handed censorship of deviance’ (p.**), and the broken spirit and destroyed mind of Septimus Warren Smith are marginalized by clear social and medical discourses of ‘proper’ masculinity as defined by a militarized culture. Where DeLillo’s protagonist has few way-markers to guide him away from his abyss of meaning, Smith is subject to a very clear disciplinary regime that reminds him of his duty to be a man. His responsibility is not to fall into the kind of pathological self-absorption that is inimical to the efficient machinery of modernity – making Smith a more pitiful cousin of the Causabon presented in Sharp’s essay – but rather to suppress emotion in the interests of productive agency. Parui suggests that this brings about not just suppression but erasure of the emotional life, making Smith less, not more of a man. Ultimately the essay suggests that Woolf’s treatment of this coerced manliness represents an epistemic shift towards the more conscious engagement with the dual functions of interior and exterior selfhood that characterised the twentieth century.

Less dramatic, but equally disabling is the ennui that afflicts Lord Glenthorn in Maria Edgeworth’s Ennui (1809). As detailed by Robin Runia in “A Man Must Make Himself”: Hypochondria in Maria Edgeworth’s Ennui’, Glenthorn suffers with a debilitating apathy and indifference unless continuously
stimulated by external factors. Where travel, sport, and study have a vitalizing impact on his spirits, their effects are only temporary and culminate in ‘an insatiable longing for something new’ (p. **). Runia reads this symptomatology within the frame of late-eighteenth-century definitions of hypochondriasis, which firmly associated the condition not just with the indolence of the wealthy, but also with a foreign decadence. Trying to rid himself of his ennui, Glenthorn trials numerous fashionable activities of the wealthy but finds consolation only in the domestic sphere and the peaceable routines of his servants. Ennui is Edgeworth’s critique of the ‘rampant moral plague of luxury’ (p. **) but more importantly in offering a domestic remedy based on duty and the importance of home, it associates the health of the male body with the knowledge and culture of women.

Another thread that emerges from these essays is the male body as a transmitter of physical, psychic or moral weakness. This can take the form – as in Buckley and Long’s essays – of class or sexual degeneracy, or of the literal threat of contamination as discussed by Wetherall-Dickson and Hall. In her essay “‘Sons of Belial’: Contaminated/Contaminating Victorian Male Bodies’. Lesley A. Hall examines the fear of the sexualized male body as a vector for diseases capable of disrupting both familial and social dynamics. While academic research has tended to focus on the potential for damage caused by the sexually diseased female body, Hall redresses the balance by considering the pariah status attributed to those, such as soldiers and sailors, considered to be over-sexed or lacking in self-control. But the prejudice was extended to those men in general society either afflicted by syphilis or gonorrhoea, or regarded as threatening through their moral laxity the reproductive healthiness of family life. Hall shows
how this threat became increasingly public in wider culture during the last decades of the nineteenth century bringing about both general condemnation and legislative amendment. Reinforcing such anxieties about wayward male concupiscence was an equally virulent condemnation of masturbation as conscious self-harming. Of particular importance is Hall’s assertion that masturbation was considered more than a personal vice, being viewed as potentially contaminative – seminal loss producing not just a range of frightful pathologies for the individual, but a transmission of harmful agents to others.

The widespread campaigns against male sexual incontinence were not wholly driven then by the ‘problem’ of desire, but by very real anxieties of literal as well as moral pollution.

Leigh Wetherall-Dickson detects the emergence of similar anxieties about the division between public and private life a century earlier. In ‘Syphilis and Sociability: The Impolite Bodies of Two Gentlemen, James Boswell (1740-1795) and Sylas Neville (1741-1840)’, she considers the stain on one’s position within civil society represented by venereal disease. Drawing on the diaries of Boswell – for whom regular doses of syphilis seem to have been regarded as an amatory hazard – and Neville, the essay explores the increasing prominence and importance of the sphere of sociable intercourse in the eighteenth century, which necessitates, for Boswell at least, a clear division between his private selfhood and conduct and his public demeanour. His self-construction as a man of society appears strikingly modern but is hampered by the periodic effects of infection that require him to closet himself away from others. During these periods, Wetherall-Dickson argues, his journal became the public audience through which he communicated as a ‘spectator of the self’ (p.***). In contrast,
Neville’s episodes of the pox seem to have exacerbated his incipient paranoia and annoyance with a world around him that refuses to acknowledge his gentlemanly qualities. After contracting an infection from sex with his housekeeper, he does not separate himself from society as Boswell does, but regards the passing on of his infection as a just reward for the lack of regard in which he seems to be held. Both men’s reaction to their condition as related through their diaries reveals for Wetherall-Dickson a shifting notion of private identity formed in response to the relatively new phenomenon of sociable intercourse.

In a different register, transmission is also the focus of Jenifer Buckley in “‘Tis My Father's Fault” Tristram Shandy and Paternal Imagination’. Here it is the inter-generational communication of character that concerns us, and in particular the intersection of literature with eighteenth-century medical rationalisations of genetic inheritance. Buckley commences her analysis of Sterne from the notion, influenced by the findings of Leeuwenhoek, that the thoughts of a father at the point of ejaculation could positively affect the child that was produced. In contrast to the imaginative transit of the mother, which it was believed, if negative or destructive during the period of pregnancy could result in birth defects, the male imagination bore the responsibility for producing hale and hearty offspring. Sterne's satirical dismissal of such ‘imaginationist’ theories of reproduction proceeds through Tristram's father who bemoans his distraction at the moment of his son's conception, which, he believes, was responsible for all his child's failings. Walter's attempts to correct the damage he believes he has done his son only bring about more serious afflictions including a broken nose and accidental circumcision, whilst his
The homosexual male body as a threatening transmitter of social and libidinal disquiet is addressed by Thomas Long in relation to writing of the American South. ‘Southern Gothic and the Queer Male Body’ argues that in the post-1945 period, and particularly prior to the Stonewall riots of 1969, the gay male body has increasingly replaced the black body in Southern culture as the abject Other, drawing down on it homophobic violence as a consequence. Working with Eve Sedgwick’s premise that, as a genre, the gothic codifies a form of ‘homophobic thematics’ (p***), Long considers how the specific religious, geographical, and political intensities of Southern culture are grafted onto that base. The tensions between normative moralities and reactive deviancies that characterizes the gothic tradition is heightened by the historical fact of slavery in the American South, which creates a tradition of scapegoating the black body as symbolic of social fears. Underlying that, and more evident in the integrationist period of Civil Rights protest, is a deeply confused struggle between homosocial and homosexual relations. In a range of texts that straddle Stonewall, Long detects a quarrel between, what he calls, a ‘blazoning’ attitude towards self-expression and the repressive demonization of the queer body through homophobic discourse. In the post-AIDS era, Long further detects an increased pathologization of homosexuality in Southern gothic producing ‘the homosexual
as the guilty perpetrator in a world divided into infected homosexuals and an uninfected [...] “general population” (p.***).

Emerging from these essays are bodies that are open to scrutiny not as coherent entities, but as dissonant collections of moral, physical abjection; the men on display here seep fluid, they creep unnervingly across constructed backdrops, and they disrupt the lines of social symbolism. If any dominant vision of the male body can be drawn from this collection it is a wounded body containing a deeply troubled consciousness that has retrenched to a form of immobile self-incertitude. As such it might be said to reflect our present culture of reading and viewing the body, which influences our critical, as much as our creative thinking. Shaping these essays into a volume has therefore allowed us to explore potential threads of pathology, all of which are, of course, tentatively offered up, but which allow for a sounding of modern ways of reading the male body in medicine and literature.

NOTES


Ibid., p. 68.


Ibid., p. 16.

Friedman, *A Mind of its Own*, p. 71.