

**Rae X. Yan, “Robert Louis Stevenson as Philosophical Anatomist: The Body Snatcher.” *English Literature in Transition, 1888-1920* 62. 4 (2019): 458-481.**

In “Robert Louis Stevenson as Philosophical Anatomist: The Body Snatcher”, Rae X. Yan proposes that Stevenson’s involvement in various modes of anatomizing has thus far been misunderstood by critics and is reductive in the sense that his interest in philosophical anatomy has been interpreted as overwhelmingly critical of Knox. “The Body Snatcher”, Yan reasons, can be read more subtly as “illuminat[ing] the entanglement of anatomizing and narrative experimentation” which characterizes both Stevenson’s and Robert Knox’s work (460). The article builds on existing research by scholars such as Allen MacDuffie and Julia Reid who have explored Stevenson’s interest in philosophical anatomy as being equally literary and scientific. Yan’s fascinating contribution to this discussion also emphasizes the Knoxian heritage of Stevenson’s discussion of philosophical anatomy in “The Body Snatcher”, as well as drawing on his body of work in other, less overtly anatomical narratives to demonstrate the resonance of this interest.

Yan’s analysis begins with an interrogation of philosophical anatomy as a discipline, and subsequently Knox’s place within this tradition. A fundamental tenet of philosophical anatomy, Yan argues, is its propensity to view “the body as a means to envision a fundamental network of relations among all living things as they were connected to a shared, universal structure” (462). Within this definition, the wider implications for literature, history and philosophy, as well as natural sciences, become clearer. Affirming philosophical anatomy’s origins within a continental tradition, rather than English Enlightenment empiricism, Yan highlights its place within a Platonic mode favoured by European anatomists, emphasizing the novelty of Knox’s approach in the British context.

By positioning Knox as being, unusually, a “generalist in approach”, Yan alludes to a trend of increasing specialization associated with the medical profession in the early nineteenth century (463). Knox’s reluctance to limit the implications of his anatomical activities to medicine demonstrates a desire for interdisciplinary relevance which makes Yan’s fictive applications of his philosophies so apt. Knox’s ideologies concerning the interrelation between science and art appear at odds with his contemporaries and with the emergence of specialized disciplines within medicine, a development which anticipated the rise of modern classificatory medicine. Drawing on Knox’s own writings on anatomy, the article highlights his slippage between metaphors of dissection and aesthetic practices.

Applying this framework to Stevenson’s depiction of Knox, it becomes clear that the ostensibly critical narrative of a grave-robbing anatomist in “The Body Snatcher” (a cultural mythology with which later-Victorian contemporaries would have been intimately familiar) is only part of the story’s invocation of anatomizing. As the practice of resurrectionism declined and the issue became less of a pressing social concern and more of a literary curiosity, stories like Stevenson’s proliferated. As Yan notes, Stevenson’s portrayal of Knox interacts with his views on philosophical anatomy rather awkwardly, representing an instrumentalizing of Knox which conflicts with the story’s overarching critique of the instrumentalizing of bodies. Stevenson’s literary dissection of Knox, creates, Yan argues, “his own monstrous double: a writer who co-opts the story of another in ways uncharitable to the narrative told” (471).

Stevenson thus applies the principles of philosophical anatomy in a variety of ways, including, more broadly, to the act of writing itself. Yan highlights the language of anatomizing employed by Stevenson in his reflections on authorship, arguing that there are parallels here between the ethical imperatives of dissection, “to give [the complications of life] body”, and the writer’s moral challenge to create “with a larger purpose in mind” (468, 469). Yan builds this argument carefully and from this point in the essay is able to apply these notions to Stevenson’s other texts with greater emphasis on the ideological similarities between Knox and Stevenson’s approach to anatomizing in literature. In *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the philosophical doctor trope re-emerges in the character of Jekyll, but is re-situated in the later nineteenth century, drawing on ideas of transcendental medicine which removes the body from its purely corporeal contexts. Another “monstrous double”, Jekyll’s scientific endeavours are problematized with this reading, which interrogates the historicity of the field. This also raises questions about the ways in which philosophical anatomy might be applied in a late nineteenth-century context. Although long after the height of body-snatching, the later decades of the century were undoubtedly still haunted by its presence in literature, culture, and legislation.

Yan’s essay presents a novel and insightful framework through which to interpret “The Body Snatcher”, utilizing a wide range of contextual and theoretical analyses. By considering the variety of ways in which philosophical anatomy influenced both Knox and Stevenson, Yan succeeds in identifying new ways to unite them, beyond their respective places as subject and writer of fictions.

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