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Catoptrum Microcosmicum [Excerpt] Commentary on an Excerpt From the Catoptrum

Microcosmicum

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Catoptrum Microcosmicum

[Excerpt]

Johann Remmelin

Commentary on an Excerpt From the *Catoptrum Microcosmicum*

Drawing and image have always been essential for the teaching and learning of anatomy for doctors and medical students. Anatomy books with flaps were first printed in 1538, and the best-known author of these is Johann Remmelin (1583-1632). His only known anatomy work is the *Catoptrum Microcosmicum* or *Kleiner Weltspiegel,* an excerpt from which is seen in the artwork. Published in 1613, it was the most successful of flap-anatomy books in terms of both longevity and breadth of readership. In print until 1753, it was distributed throughout Europe and even as far away as Japan. *Catoptrum Microcosmicum* means *Mirror on the Small World*—derived from the Ancient Greek κάτοπτρον, a mirror “to present a clear and correct image”—here, a mirror into the small world of anatomy as opposed to the macrocosmicum, or great world, of the Divine. Extant copies are rare: Only 37 examples are catalogued. The Dutch-Latin edition shown here was published in 1667 but was printed from the blocks of the 1613 first edition with minimal alteration, so it can be considered as a 1613 text. This edition is also significant because the first English-Latin edition of 1670 was printed from these plates.

The book comprises five, loose, previously bound, folio pages: a title page with a plate of arteries in the male and female on its reverse (not by Remmelin); three pages—Visio Prima, Secunda, and Tertia—depicting a male and a female figure, a male figure, and a female figure, respectively; and a final sheet that is the Latin-Dutch description of the parts. Visio Prima is shown here. The illustrative texts include classical references from Ovid and Pindar as well as many from St. Jerome’s Vulgate Bible. (A translation of these phrases is available on request.) The purpose of these references is to illustrate the orderly structure of the external world (the macrocosm) in relation to God, together with many memento mori to remind the reader of the transitory nature of life and the illusion of worldly permanence as
opposed to the everlasting Divine. By understanding the familiar, outer world with this lens, Remmelin invites us to view the hidden, small, anatomical world in the same way.

The references presented in the work squarely site it in the Renaissance European, Christian sociocultural (including gender roles), and Reformation political perspectives.¹ When it was published, science and religion were deeply integrated as a paradigm. Even 200 years later, the first and foremost use of anatomy, in the words of a professor of surgery, was to provide “convincing proofs of the Existence of a Supreme Being.”⁴ Here, from my perspective, there is no wish to objectify anatomy, no attempt to remove the body from the world. Consider the blank white or black backgrounds of photographed surgical specimens in modern anatomy books. A medical student using such texts may learn unconsciously that the “correct” way to present data is without context, which reinforces perceptions of the desirability of objectiveness in science, and that the subjective, messy, clutter of context is not important.

The Catoptrum Microcosmicum ameliorates this erasure, reminding us that the context and the emotions context inspires—in Remmelin’s case, wonder and awe at God’s work and reassurance of His planning, purpose, and meaning—are as much about the learning of anatomy as the opening of flaps, whether paper or flesh, and going ever deeper (up to seven layers in this work) into the mysterious realms within. Remmelin speaks to contemporary moves within the teaching of anatomy in connecting students to the life lived by the donor by such means as meetings between donors’ families and students, modeling the importance of context for clinical work later.

Imagine if medical students, on commencing dissection, received a Remmelin-inspired dossier from the donor, written by the donor, showing how they placed themselves in the world, who and what were important to them and why, their social, cultural, and political beliefs, their own macrocosm. Then, as students dissected the layers of the microcosm, the anatomy—whether hips decayed by golf, hands thickened from farming, tattoos worn with
pride—could be understood in relation to the patient’s macrocosm, fostering the clinical reflex of always considering the relation of the micro to the macro, the macro to micro, so required for living patients’ consultations. The *Catoptrum Microcosmicum* shows how old texts can speak to us in new ways. Although over 350 years old and long obsolete for anatomical teaching, the *Microcosmicum* lives on, not only as an objet d’art, a curiosity, and a memento mori but also as a tutor reminding us of the deep relationship between context and medical teaching, a lesson being relearned today.

**References:**