



Kaitlin Pontzer//There may be no wrong way to grieve, but the grief of Jane Barker was particularly odd. When her beloved brother died in 1675, Barker wrote an anatomical poem to commemorate his passing. To be precise, she wrote “A Farewell to POETRY, with a Long Digression on ANATOMY,” in which she was guided on a journey through the human body, describing all that she saw there. She mentioned her brother’s death at key moments. Why would she express her loss in this way? If we journey with her through her odd and interesting poem, we see that she was expressing a debt to her brother, who tutored her in medicine. However, she was also expressing some doubts about the value of the knowledge he left to her.

Jane Barker was an unusually educated woman. Writing at a time in which female education was limited, medical knowledge was available to her indirectly through her brother’s education. Through his tutoring, she became aware of the most current research. She was also writing at a

time in which philosophy was undergoing a major shift from theologically-based scholasticism to empiricism and natural philosophy. The most obvious thrust of her poem was to exhibit this new scientific knowledge.

Within the poem, Barker spends the bulk of her time demonstrating the extent of her medical training. As she begins her journey, she is greeted by a succession of scientists. First, Bartholine, a 17<sup>th</sup> century anatomist, shows her the:

Muscles, Arteries, and Veins,

... how from the Brains

The Nerves descend; and how they do dispence

To ev'ry Member, Motive Pow'r and Sence

(Barker, 100).

Next, she is led around the rest of the body by Walaeus and Harvey, whose discovery of circulation makes them appropriate guides to “th’ *Circles of the circulating Blood*” (103). She meets the physician Richard Lower, pioneer of transfusions and cardiorespiratory function, “Surveying the whole *Structure of the Heart*” (104). “Anatomy,” then, can be read as a tribute to her brother’s contribution to her learning, as well as an ode to the world of knowledge that he made accessible to her.

One of the starkest characteristics of the poem is its Dante-like style. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was a 14<sup>th</sup> century poetic expression of scholastic thought in which Dante himself is led through hell and purgatory by Virgil, and through heaven by Dante’s muse Beatrice. In a tone reminiscent of Dante’s journey, Barker finds herself in need of direction and is greeted by intellectual guides who proceed to lead her through paths of knowledge. The Dante-like tone echoes in the greeting: “Come on, says *Harvey*,... follow me, and I thy doubts will clear. Then we began our Journey...” (102).

If Barker is setting up a comparison with Dante, it seems to be largely one of contrast. Whereas Dante is guided by a poet and a muse, Barker opens her poem by saying, “Farewell, my gentle Friend, kind *Poetry*.” (99). Instead of a poet, she is led by physicians. Furthermore, she is not led through the circles of the afterlife on a journey toward God, as Dante was, but through the “circles of circulating blood,” on a journey of anatomical discovery. Barker seems to evoke the tradition of Dante, only to situate herself firmly in the emerging tradition of observational scientific knowledge.

If, however, Barker is using Dante as a point of contrast in order to situate herself in the epistemological context bequeathed by her brother, it is not without bitterness. An important hint that she is dissatisfied with the state of 17<sup>th</sup> century knowledge comes when she meets Lower. When Lower sees her, he exclaims that she is “Sister to him whose Worth we all *revere*” (104). Lower

claims that the community of natural philosophers is disillusioned by the death of her brother, and they almost hate their practice, “Since [they] cou’d find out naught in all [their] Art,/ That cou’d prolong the motion of his Heart” (104). This failure of medical knowledge is reiterated later, when Barker imagines her brother in heaven and says to him:

Should’st thou... look down on us below,

To see how busie we

Are in *Anatomaë*,

Thoud’st laugh to see our Ignorance;

Who somethings miss, & somethings hit by chance

(105).

The limitations of the knowledge she has demonstrated, then, form an important element of the grief she is conveying.

Like Dante, Barker ends her poem in paradise. Unlike Dante’s Beatrice, who guides him through heaven, Barker’s brother looks down laughingly on her earth-bound attempts at knowledge. She looks upward at him from the embodied position that she has created for herself throughout the poem. Having cast her lot in with the medical wisdom of the day, she does not ascend like the poet Dante into heaven to see her friend. Instead, she and other natural philosophers “do but in twilight go,” not transcending the “*Terrestrial dross*” that is the materialism of empirical knowledge (105-6). Barker’s unique poem, in which she grieves for her brother by recounting a physical journey through the various caverns of the body, is comprehensible if we take her in her particular context as a woman indebted for medical knowledge to a dead brother and as an individual writing at a time of epistemological revolution. Barker’s grief in “Anatomy” points to the potential of empirical knowledge in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but also to a strong sense of loss, not only for her brother, but also for less embodied ways of knowing.

Selected Works Referenced:

Primary:

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