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Palgrave Historical Studies in the Criminal Corpse and its Afterlife.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Mortality and its Timings. When is Death?

Edited by Shane McCorristine

Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017, 167 pages. ISBN number – 978-1-137-58327-7, Hardcover price 20.00 GBP

The idea for this volume arose from a conference at the University of Leicester (2015) that brought together an experimental interdisciplinary research team to explore the power of the criminal corpse in European culture and history. The geographical focus of this volume is thus Europe, but it showcases contributions from authors from a broad spectrum of institutions and fields, such as drama, cultural and political history, legal studies, anthropology, philosophy and ethics. There are chapters on the conservation of corpses to preserve the sleep-like sterile aesthetic quality of death; fear of premature burial in nineteenth century England; rumours of Hitler's survival; and language play in Shakespearean tragedy. These are just some examples that show that theme cohort is as eclectic as the author selection.

What at first glance appear unrelated topics are ultimately tied together nicely with the common thread of locating tension between finality and continuation of vitality and agency (although not without apparent effort from the editor). Seemingly, Lacquer's following argument is another tying thread: 'death in culture takes time because it takes time for the rent in the social fabric to be rewoven and for the dead to do their work in creating, recreating, representing, or disrupting the social order of which they had been a part' (Lacquer, cited in McCorristine 2017:11) . The contributors to this book suggest that the time of death is social, as well as biological.

Notably, the only chapter in which the specific time of death is uncontested is Jonathan Ree's inquiry into criminal execution. He explores the thrilling fascination of the last moments before death and states that this reflects us back onto our own imagined final moments. Highlighting the lasting or newly emerging anxieties surrounding timings of death from a historical perspective provides a unique approach for grasping the complexities of death timings. The death certificate is a significant status sorting tool for our era, although it only notes where we find a date and place of death, not the time

of death as such. Douglas Davies' philosophical consideration of the impossible date of death is based on precise timing of death not being coeval with 'time of not being'. Death can also mean the beginning of a sensed presence of the dead.

The question of timings of death is in principle interdisciplinary, because each inquiring person has an ontological prerogative to explore his mortality and has at his disposal a multitude of approaches towards death as a universal and all-consuming experience. Even though there is a myriad of ways to think about death, Lacquer concludes that not much has truly changed - 'to be dead' still remains conflated with 'never taking a breath again' (Lacquer 2017:152). But the dead nevertheless remain non-biological actors among the living due to our own unyielding involvement in their preservation or resurrection.

Being based in the School of Interdisciplinary Studies myself, I appreciate this volume as a valuable contribution to encouraging innovative and stimulating interdisciplinary collaboration in death studies.

References:

McCorristine, Shane, 'Introduction', *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Mortality and its Timings. When is Death?* Edited by Shane McCorristine, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017. pp. 11-16.

Lacquer, Thomas, 'Afterword', *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Mortality and its Timings. When is Death?* Edited by Shane McCorristine, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017. pp. 145-153.

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