Armed with Scalpel and Cuirass: Violence, Masculinity, and Juan Valverde de Amusco
by Stephanie Nadalo

The images in Juan Valverde de Amusco’s *Historia de la composition del cuerpo humano*, first published in 1556, have often elicited the criticism of medical scholars who denounce his inclusion of non-anatomical visual information. One historian described how Valverde’s treatise robbed the anatomical illustrations of their accuracy through the inclusion of extraneous visual elements:

> [Valverde] has added some non-essential remarks and has added some plates engraved upon copper [...] without adding to accuracy: on the contrary in several respects Valverde robbed them of their exactitude by complicating them with objects strange to anatomy. Thus one finds cadavers with cuirass, shield, and sword,—very strange ornaments for the art.¹

Although the description is imaginative and somewhat inaccurate (there is no ornamental shield illustrated in Valverde’s text), the author’s confusion reveals the very anxiety and unease that Valverde’s imagery has elicited.

Irrespective of issues of accuracy, images such as the self–displaying figures (Fig. 1) and the armored Roman breastplates with internal organs (Fig. 2) illustrate how Valverde pursued two significant themes in his engravings. On the one hand, by emphasizing the physical violence present within the anatomy theater, Valverde defined dissection as a masculine and aggressive practice. On the other hand, the incorporation of uncanny and grotesque elements into his pictures served to destabilize the presumed authority of images and foreclose their potential to function as objective visual testimony. These features acted as constant reminders to the viewer that true knowledge of the body could be obtained by dissection only, rather than through text or image.

Visual tropes reinforcing masculine violence and uncanny violation appear regularly throughout Valverde’s book, sometimes within the same image. His illustrations often contrast the animation and apparent liveliness of the anatomical figures with the grotesque violence inherent to the practice of anatomy.² This is especially apparent in his series of self–displaying figures engaged in their own bodily violation. In one of these images, a male figure grips his omentum (the peritoneum fold that connects the stomach to other organs) in his mouth and turns his head to display his intestines beneath (Fig. 1). In a different image, a dissected figure plunges his hands into the chest of another dissected corpse. Through such juxtapositions Valverde conflates the roles of the dissector with the dissected, the violator with the violated.

One of Valverde’s visual references to violence explicitly situates dissection within the context of war. In this engraved plate (Fig. 2), Valverde displays male viscera framed within Imperial Roman cuirasses (armored breastplates). On one level, the visual trope suggests homage to the great treatise of Vesalius. As Glenn Harcourt has pointed out, Vesalius’s *Fabrica* included an image of human viscera framed within the truncated body of a famous fragment of ancient sculpture known as the Torso Belvedere (Fig. 3). Regarding this image, Harcourt argues that Vesalius’s graphic transposition of internal organs onto an antique ideal physical male form served to simultaneously mediate the violence inherent in dissection and reinforce the notion of a normative male body.³ Valverde’s reinterpretation of the Vesalian sculptural torsos charged his anatomical imagery with an additional layer of meaning through the inclusion of Roman armor. The visual conflation between anatomy and war is likely related to Valverde’s historical account of medicine which he discusses in the prologue to his treatise. According to Valverde, the healing arts emerged out of the Trojan War. The first doctor, Aesklepius, was the son of Apollo and nephew of Mercury, “considered a god among Greeks” for his talent in the healing arts.⁴ Valverde mentions that Aesklepius’s sons, Machaon and Podaleirius, were also celebrated doctors. Considering Valverde’s subsequent skepticism about the authority of ancient texts, it is not without potential irony that he assures his reader that this medical lineage is true because Homer affirms it as such (in Book 11 of the *Iliad*).⁴

Thus, the cuirass–intestine images evoke the heroic origins of medicine and connect it directly to war. But the viewer’s perceptual and conceptual understanding of these images is deliberately destabilized by Valverde’s emphasis on the uncanny.⁴ Although the cuirasses purportedly reveal the dissected viscera of the human body, they also set up a
series of rhetorical juxtapositions that question the boundary between interior and exterior; exposure is contrasted to concealment, vulnerability to impregnability, and embodiment to disembodiment.

Valverde’s use of conflicting representational approaches in the cuirass-intestine image, and throughout his entire visual program, serves to highlight the artificial organization of information within any image. His unique strategy of combining conflicting conceptual systems must be understood in relation to the severe skepticism he expresses in the prologue regarding the unreliability of written texts.

After locating the origins of medicine within the Trojan War, Valverde builds on one major premise—the danger of accepting the authority of texts without empirical verification. After discussing numerous notable physicians, Valverde laments Galen’s hegemonic control over medical knowledge. Like Vesalius, he also criticizes physicians for not realizing that because it was derived through animal and not human dissection, Galen’s information was in error. He describes how Galen’s text remained unchallenged until Vesalius, “opened the eyes of many,” and demonstrated the fallacy of trusting everything one reads.6 Valverde reminds the reader that one should not trust without first examining the truth, because all texts are written by men and are susceptible to man’s fallible nature.7 Finally, with a mix of wit and sarcasm, Valverde implies that even his own treatise remains suspect because it lacks a physical specimen. He advises his reader to either come to Italy, where anyone—anyone male—can witness a dissection, or take the initiative and prove all truths for himself.

Thus, in claiming that anatomical truth was only verifiable through reading the “book” of the body, Valverde questions the authority of his own treatise. By accentuating elements of the grotesque and uncanny, Valverde highlights the constructed nature of all images and forces his reader to recall the original source—the human body. Despite his skepticism of all authoritative texts, Valverde redeems his own treatise through his warning to his readers: each man must examine the truth for himself in order to uncover those fallacies which he can, “touch with his own hands.”8 This idea is reinforced visually in a small scene that appears with an engraved portrait of Valverde (Fig. 4). In the image to the bottom left, both Valverde and his assistant are shown directly touching the cadaver, as though to physically demonstrate the information contained in the book that Valverde holds with his left hand. Through these means, Valverde suggests two aspects that are crucial for gaining anatomical knowledge: the text-image serves as a recorded proposition, and the physical body acts as its verifying proof. Without the physical specimen, the text and images are incomplete—even potentially misleading—but the text also verifies the body. This text-specimen dependency can be perceived as the teleological impetus informing Valverde’s most anomalous visual contributions.

Like war, dissection in the 16th century remained a thoroughly masculine activity. Women were rarely allowed to practice dissection in university settings, and were not officially trained as physicians. Although the readership of anatomical treatises was predominately male, even the very few potential female readers of Valverde’s text would have been denied access to a physical specimen for verification. In requiring a physical body for verifying, anatomical knowledge in the 16th century remained firmly in the domain of men and gods.

3. Many of the subsequent Valverdean images evoke Greek and Roman antiquity through mythology. The “muscle man figure” acts as an evocation of Ovid’s Marsyas, the female pudic figura evokes Aphrodite, and the lion-head cap worn by one self-displaying figure evokes the labours of Hercules, and finally, the cuirass-abdomen evokes the glory of the Imperial Roman army.
4. “Volendo io scrivere l’istoria dell’Anatomia […] parmi necessario dir primieramente la sua origine, insieme con le cagioni, per le quali fù trovata, e dapoi trasalutata: accioche quel che non hanno commodità di poterla vedere o esercitare ne’ corpi humani, sappiano di coloro che ne hanno scritto, a chi maggior fede prestar si debba. […]” E’ adunque la Medicina cosa tanto antica […] Nondimeno solo a’ Greci s’attribuisce l’invenzione di questa arte, ai che per haverla essa esercita più di’alch’un’altra natione, costretti forse dalla necessità, per le guerre, che con straniari gento ogn’hora faevano, nelle quali, era necessario ricercar diversi sorti di ferite […] Il primo adunque che tra’ Greci abbia nome di Medico fu Esculapio figliuolo di Apollo, nipote di Mercurio per sopra nome ditto Trimegisto. Questo Esculapiò fu all’antico innanzi la guerra di Troia, & hebbe tanto credito tra’ Greci, che’l collocorno nel numero degli Dei loro. Ad Esculapio successero due suoi figliuoli, detti l’uno Poldario, e l’altro Machaon, huomini similimente molto eccellenti in quell’arte: de quali fà menzione Homero nella Guerra di Troia, non senza grande ammirazione, ancorché che egli non dica che curassero altro che ferite, né che tenessero conto alcuno di quello, che all’ordine del vivere s’apparisse nè delle purghe, e sicoppe, che hobbegi tutti usavansi. Luqal cosa manifestamente dimostra la Chirugia e la più antica parte della Medicina, e quella, della quale essi più stima facevano. Perché attribuendo essi la cagione dell’altre infermità tutte le lor peccati (come il medesimo Homero afferma) non cercauano per sanar quelle altro rimedio, che quello di Dio […] Per questa ragione dopo la Guerra di Troia furono molti eccellent huomini, che esercitarono la medicina […] From Prologo, Juan Valverde de Amusco. Anatomia del Corpo Humano, Nuovamente Ristampata (Venice, 1682).
5. Valverde’s inclusion of the cuirass as a frame for depicting the abdominal cavity with intestines is likely a visual- verbal pun. In ancient Greece and Rome, a cuirass was originally a breastplate made of leather used by soldiers for protection. Although cuirasses later began to incorporate elements in copper, the origin of the term cuirass derives from the Latin adjective coriaceus, meaning “of leather,” which is notably similar to the Greek word ‘choi rion’ meaning intestinal membrane. While Valverde’s conception of the Greek wordplay is arguable, his descriptive text signals another potential visual-verbal play. In the section describing the abdominal cavity in relation to the layer of fat and blood vessels that covers the internal organs, he describes that the protective layer (now called the omentum) “covers [the viscera] like a shirt.” Thus, in the depiction of the abdominal cavity, the “shirt” of the intestines is removed and replaced by the framing of the Roman Imperial cuirass. The extracted omentum is then placed adjacent to the cuirass-abdomen in a diagrammatic extraction. The abdominal ‘covering’ is thus exposed and unprotected while the viscera remain literally armed.
7. “[Non si deve] dar loro tanta fede, senza esaminare prima la verità” […] “Non considerando che quelli a i quali prestano tanta fede, furono huomini, come siamo noi, e poterono facilmente trascurarsi, ò ingannarsi in alcuna cosa, come ogni dìveggiamo accadere a più dotte in molte.” Ibid.
8. "I quali se pur non vogliono pigliar tanta fatica, almeno non dovrebbero cercar di difendere l'ignoranza loro con l'autorità di quest'autore, e di quello, e massime in quelle cose, nelle quali si può toccar con il mano il contrario." Ibid.