Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed. *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. vi, 320.

Sensible Flesh, edited by Elizabeth D. Harvey, is a probing exploration of the construction of touch in early modern Western culture. It is a remarkably dextrous work, which encompasses many disciplines, from literature and painting to architecture and medicine. The contributors bring out how touch served to organize knowledge, mobilize desire and define human subjectivity prior to the rise of modern visual culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This recuperation of the salience of tactility in the Renaissance imaginary is critical reading for anyone interested in pursuing a full-bodied “archaeology of perception” — and not merely that of “the speaking eye,” as in the now-standard Foucauldian account of the origins of certain modern institutions.

One of the contexts in which touch was evoked was painting. Jodi Cranston examines the quest for “vividness” in Renaissance painting, which led to the invention of the “portrait of the back” (or turning sitter) and the extensive discussion of the “magic touch of the brush” (including the practice of literally shaping the paint with the fingers). Another context where touch came to the fore was that of anatomy. After Vesalius, anatomical authority came to be vested in hands-on manipulation of the dissected body, as opposed to the inherited knowledge of the body derived from the writings of classical authorities. According to Bettina Mathes, the anatomical illustrations (such as those in Vesalius’ *Fabrica*) which mediated this transition involve “a complex negotiation between tactility and visibility,” in that the illustrations “translate the dissector’s manual touch into a visual touch for the viewers and readers of anatomy books” (pp. 112, 117). It is also possible to read the imbrication of touching and looking in early modern anatomy as an attempt to imbue the manual exploration of the body by the dissector or surgeon with the prestige and rationality customarily ascribed to vision.

This attempted elevation of the hand into an instrument of “Reason” introduced a split into the conventional construction of touch as fundamentally erotic and feminine in nature. This split was exacerbated by the masculine invasion of the previously feminine domain of midwifery or obstetrics. Eve Keller documents how (in the self-aggrandizing discourse of male physicians) “touch gets reconceptualized, to become newly aligned with the masculine attributes of reason and decorous action; the generating woman gets positioned as the generally silent object of a practitioner’s magisterial performance”; and the (mostly female) others in attendance at a birthing get sidelined on account of the “unthinking aggression” and “dangerous ignorance” of their manual interventions (p. 70). This marginalization was aided by the physicians’ monopoly on the use of instruments, such as the forceps. But it did not go uncontested, as some female midwives questioned the men’s reliance on metal instruments and want of the “natural Sympathy” common to women.

Further insight into how the meaning and use of the senses (especially touch) became a site of struggle and contestation between the sexes is provided by Misty Anderson's "Living in a Material World." This chapter centres on the maverick seventeenth-century natural philosopher and dramatist, Margaret Cavendish. Cavendish's "organic materialism" and affirmation of a "sensual plurality of knowledges" ("for I believe that the Eye, Ear, Nose, Tongue and all the Body, have knowledge as well as the Mind") put her at odds with the philosophical othering of the body and of the world in the "new" science of the period (pp. 191–92). There was no space for her kind of vitalism in the mechanistic and rationalist worldview propounded by Hobbes and Descartes. The latter thinkers accordingly ignored her, while others dismissed her as mad. Cavendish's response, Anderson argues, was to invent another world with a woman-friendly social order, whence her 1668 play *The Convent of Pleasure*. Cavendish was not actually one to retreat, however, contrary to Anderson's suggestion. Rather, as we learn from Constance Classen's analysis of the full corpus of Cavendish's work in *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (Routledge, 1998), Cavendish devised a panoply of imaginative techniques of ideological subversion, from describing housewives as consummate "experimental philosophers" to deriding scientists as eye-minded fools "who imagine that all mysteries can be comprehended through extending the power of sight" (pp. 98–106).

In addition to affirming the importance of attending to the imbrication or "negotiation" of the senses and to the gendering of perception, *Sensible Flesh* provokes the realization that the senses work in conflict, not just consensus, with each other. The Renaissance understanding of the senses, while fundamentally hierarchical, was nevertheless remarkably ex-centric or centrifugal in character, compared to the nineteenth-century fascination with sensory correspondences (Baudelaire), or totalizing *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Wagner), or the complete subordination of sensation to cognition in modern psychology. This conflict of the faculties is best brought out in Carla Mazzio's "Acting with Tact," which centres on Thomas Tomkis's 1607 comedy *Lingua, or the Combat of the Tongue and the five Senses for Superiority*.

The action of Tomkis's play begins with Ladie Lingua (the tongue and language) sewing dissension within the pentarchy by planting a robe and crown for the five to discover and fight over. The sensorium quickly breaks down into warring sense organs, each proclaiming its own importance as the most representative of the senses. Lowly Tactus (touch) emerges as the most challenging and challenged of the combatants on account of his "resistance to representation" and "polymorphous diversity," in Mazzio's delightful phrase (p. 166). For touch is dispersed throughout the body (despite the pretensions of the hand to serve as *pars pro toto*), its operations are "immediate" (there is no medium between the body and the touchable world), and, if the truth be known,

Tactus proclaims, every sense is a kind of touch. Such a conflation of distinctions, if allowed to stand, would undermine all categorization, all calculation, and all the Arts to boot: for whither music to the ear or painting to the sight, if touch is all there is? This truth is accordingly banished, and the hierarchy of the senses restored in the final act, but the worrying questions about sensory boundaries — the issue of overlapping dominions (or synaesthesia) — raised by up-start Tactus can never be truly resolved, Tomkis seems to imply. Indeed, while Visus (sight) receives the crown, Tactus gets the robe — a highly suitable door-prize.

Besides bringing to light the agency of the senses, Mazzio's chapter gives a whole new dimension to audience-response theory by virtue of her insistence on the work of sensation, not just interpretation, in the reception of Renaissance drama. Playgoing was a full-body experience, she suggests. Another chapter which brings out the conflicted agency of the faculties — albeit moderately (touch being the mean sense), rather than forcefully, as does Mazzio — is Rebekah Smick's "Touch in the *Hypnertomachia Poliphili*: The Sensual Ethics of Architecture."

Limitations of space prevent me from delving into the many other topics addressed by the contributors to *Sensible Flesh*, such as caresses that wound (Sujata Iyengar); words that heal (Margaret Healy); naked savages (Scott Manning Stevens); the questionable phallus — that is, the representation of the penis in the form of an interrogation mark — and extended clitoris (Mathes); the skin ego of contemporary psychoanalytic theory, as grasped from a Renaissance perspective (Harvey); the political economy of touch, or how the biblical injunction *noli me tangere* served as the charter for the fencing and enclosure of both the Old and New World by English colonizers (Elizabeth Sauer and Lisa M. Smith); and the chiasmus/aporia between figures of speech (synecdoche, metonymy) and sensory processes (Mazzio, Harvey, Lynn Enterline).

Sensible Flesh is a book of high calibre, which both historicizes touch and sensualizes history. The latter gesture is an especially important theoretical move in our late modern culture, where "visual studies" is all the rage and theorization has been reduced, if not to discourse, then to visualization. The publication of this book, coming in the wake of Classen's magisterial history of the senses (from antiquity to postmodernity) in *The Color of Angels*, confirms that a sensual revolution is afoot in the humanities and social sciences, as I have argued in *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2003). This revolution promises to eclipse both the "linguistic turn" and the "pictorial turn" of late twentieth-century scholarship. As it comes to pass, the life of the senses, long equated with the unexamined life, will finally receive the scholarly attention it deserves.

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