G. Geltner, *Flogging Others: Corporal Punishment and Cultural Identity from Antiquity to the Present*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014. Paper. Pp. 112. €12.95. ISBN: 97-89-08964-786-3.
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Larissa Tracy, ed., *Flaying in the Pre-Modern World: Practice and Representation*. Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2017. Pp. xviii, 406; many black-and-white figures. $99. ISBN: 978-1-84384-452-5.
Table of contents available online at https://boydellandbrewer.com/flaying-in-the-pre-modern-world-hb.html
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At first glance, these two books could not be more different; one is a very short monograph, the other is an extensive collection of essays. The books share, however, the same subject: the human body and specifically its injury and destruction, by corporal punishment in the first instance and by flaying in the second.

G. Geltner has aimed his slim volume squarely at the narrative that as civilization has advanced into modernity, it has progressively abandoned corporal punishment—an idea whose intellectual underpinnings he associates with Michel Foucault and, more recently, Daniel Pinker. He argues that premodern societies used corporal punishment far less, and when they did were far more careful and thoughtful about it than commonly assumed, while modern societies have by no means abandoned it. Societies both present and past have used corporal punishment to mark and separate out internal deviants. These same societies have also promoted their own collective identity at the expense of other groups by accusing them of using it, or of using it wrongly, in an effort to cast the "other" as "profoundly different, brutal, and uncivilized" (18). The result is a direct, scathing, and largely successful critique of what Geltner sees as the intellectually dishonest rhetoric about corporal punishment in modern Western identity narratives and policy arguments.

Flogging covers an astonishing range, from ancient Mesopotamia, China, India, and Persia to the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Americas. But the book is too short for Geltner to paint in more than very broad strokes. As a consequence, it is really an extended essay; it consists mostly of narrative argument with an impressionistic use of evidence. Nevertheless, Geltner successfully undermines the notion that premodern societies were arbitrary and unsophisticated, or did not think carefully about when and how they punished the body. For example, some ancient societies used corporal punishment to mark social status and reinforce their sense of right order. This left them free to tarnish the reputations of other societies by accusing them of using it in a way that violated right order. In medieval Europe, corporal punishment took a back seat to pecuniary penalties. Because it was so uncommon, it had a tremendous shock value when it was used, particularly when it took the form of dismemberment (66). This raises the implicit, but not clearly articulated point that it is the (to us) shocking nature of medieval corporal punishment when it did happen, rather than its absolute frequency, that underlies the Middle Ages' modern reputation for punitive barbarity. Enlightenment and later thinkers, including Thomas Jefferson and Jeremy Bentham, tolerated and even advocated corporal punishment both in policy and in practice. Western colonial powers in the nineteenth century enthusiastically resorted to it when dealing with indigenous peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas—peoples who were not always willing to use corporal punishment themselves (73). In the modern West, voices continue to advocate for nonjudicial corporal punishment (e.g., spanking of children); this is driven, Geltner argues, by a pervasive faith in violence as a legitimate way to resolve disputes, and in the rights to privacy and religious or cultural autonomy.

At times, Geltner seems to have set up a bit of a straw man. For example, he repeatedly comments that his evidence complicates or contradicts "our view of a violent, thoughtless,

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and disproportional regimen" (33). I am not sure that even people who see corporal punishment as barbaric and something Western cultures have (or ought to have) abandoned would necessarily argue that some past societies were not thoughtful and careful about it, or deployed it in targeted ways to make specific points; Geltner even has one of his nineteenth-century foils, James Glass Bertram, acknowledge as much (17–18). This critique notwithstanding, *Flogging* makes its point that modern Western discourses and arguments about corporal punishment say more about modern Western needs and agendas than they do either about the past or about the present.

Flaying has a different sort of purpose: to understand the relationship in the premodern West between the actual practice of skinning people and the ways that images of flaying were deployed in literature and art. Here too, human skin is a medium for marking, othering, and sending messages about identity, through its visible injury and removal but also through its display and repurposing; as the editor Larissa Tracy notes in her introduction, "[s]kin is the parchment upon which identity is written" (1). The volume shares with Geltner's the impulse to push back against the trope of premodernity as barbaric. Flaying, we read repeatedly, was in actual practice scarce, and when it was used, it was primarily associated with treason. It was much more an idea, a phenomenon that had a variety of meanings in a variety of contexts and could therefore be deployed rhetorically and artistically in pursuit of a wide range of social, political, religious or literary and artistic goals—precisely because it was so uncommon in practice and only used in the most extreme circumstances.

This is a hard book to get through; the contributors do not shy away from graphic descriptions of their subjects. In the book's first section, "Flaying in Practice," Jack Hartnell introduces us to the instruments of flaying, forcing us to confront skin removal as a genuine craft that required skill. Kelly DeVries allows us to grasp the reality of flaying, in the form of the surviving skin of the Venetian Marcantonio Bragadin, flayed by the Ottomans in 1571. Susan Small shows us flaying as part of a symbolic language. When in the late sixteenth-century German town of Bedburg the accused werewolf, rapist, and murderer Peter Stubbe was tied to a wheel and flayed, broken, decapitated, and burned at the stake, at each stage the tools used by his executioner invoked aspects of the crimes they were meant to punish, "thereby mapping the misdeeds on to the body of the criminal" (71). In Mary Rambaran-Olm's essay on the myth of flayed Dane-skins covering the doors of early English churches, we look for reality and find that it is not there; cowhide has been rewritten into human skin as England's Anglo-Saxon past was rewritten in the early modern and modern periods for presentist purposes. According to Frederika Bain, wearing flayed skin could change reality, whether it was an uppity English woman who was tamed by wrapping her in horse hide or Icelanders who put on flayed human skin and turned into sorcerers.

The book's longest section, "Representations of Flaying," offers us a dizzying array of images, some written, others pictorial or sculptural. The arena is initially religious; flaying appears as a horror that is nevertheless necessary to the fulfillment of divine aims. It allows the saint to transform from the human to the divine; according to Asa Simon Mittman and Christine Sciacca, when in a sequence of illuminations about the flaying of Saint Bartholomew in the Laudario of Sant'Agnese the flayed saint wraps himself in his own former skin, he reveals himself to be something new and miraculous—something "posthuman" (166). Flaying also allows God to communicate. For Peter Dent, Christ's brutal flagellation as represented by late medieval crucifixes was tantamount to flaying; it removed His skin and allowed the viewer absolute and unmediated access to the Word. The line between flagellation and flaying disappears completely when Christ's tortured skin itself becomes parchment. Both Dent and Valerie Gramling refer to the fourteenth-century English "charters of Christ," in which Christ's skin itself became the parchment on which the tortures of the Passion wrote a binding contract with humanity. In Gramling's late medieval English Cycle passion plays, Jesus's flogging gradually removes his skin, thus releasing his soul to eternal life; yet as it is

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removed the skin is transformed into parchment in order to preserve the text that testifies to his human life and sacrifice. Sherry C. M. Lindquist focuses on flaying as a means of redemption. In a very close reading of the flaying and flagellation images in the first Book of Hours that Jean, duke of Berry (d. 1416), commissioned from the Limbourg brothers, Lindquist argues that the brothers offered the duke images that alluded to his notorious sexual sins and offered him a redemptive narrative: "In a complete circuit of potential sin and redemption, the manuscript pictured beautiful, penetrable bodies that might stimulate pleasurable fantasies, appealing flesh ruptured as a reminder of the penance due for sinful thoughts, and bleeding that recalled the salvific blood of Christ" (187).

The arena then changes to the secular. Here flaying is above all a sign of dominance. Emily Leverett extends flaying to include cannibalism; in the Middle English romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*, when the Lionheart unknowingly consumes Saracen flesh and is not corrupted by it, he creates an image of total power. Michael Livingston shows us that in Arthurian literature, beard flaying, in shaming the flayed victim and glorifying the victorious flayer, served as a gendered sign of political authority but not always a positive one. Flaying could also assert social and political dominance. Renée Ward argues that in his fatal meeting with Robin Hood, the bounty-hunter Guy of Gisborne, by wearing the hide of a warhorse, had stepped outside of the boundaries of his social position. Robin, by first figuratively (by taking the horse hide for himself) and then literally flaying Guy, reestablishes right social order and inscribes it on Guy's body. Flaying did not always establish dominance by destroying villains, however. Tracy points out that in the Norse *fornaldarsögur*, monstrous figures that lose their flesh gain a new identity that enables them to support the sagas' heroes.

As in any collection of this kind, not all of the essays are equally persuasive. To accept Lindquist's argument about the *Belles Heures* of Jean of Berry, for example, readers will need to tolerate overlapping and at times contradictory artistic agendas in tension: bodies playing to the duke's sexual predilections alongside flaying images designed to evoke repentance for those predilections; images addressing the most intimate and politically damaging aspects of the duke's personality in a manuscript intended for display (205). William Sayers's essay on flaying in early Ireland asks at the start how a vernacular story about Saint Bartholomew might have been understood and processed by the Irish. We never really get an answer, however, beyond a brief assertion that there were "multiple ways in which the [Bartholomew] story may have been fairly readily understood and appreciated as representative of an eastern culture associated with early Christianity" (283). The essay is really devoted to demonstrating (successfully) that flaying was alien to Irish culture.

Perry Neil Harrison's epilogue on anthropodermic bibliopegy in the early modern period presents binding books in human skin as the logical conclusion of the thread that throughout the volume ties flaying to written texts through the medium of skin. It also echoes Geltner's arguments about corporal punishment as rhetoric and the rhetoric of corporal punishment; binding books in human skin, Harrison argues, served as a way both for the books' creators and owners to reinforce their own identity and assault the identities of ideological others. Placed together, these two volumes should make it very difficult for anyone to use easy tropes about brutal treatment of the human body, whether in the past or in the present, to do either.

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