



The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages

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This work examines the imagery and symbolism which surrounded the body in the Middle Ages. The author focuses on the King's surgeon in 14th century France, Henri de Mondeville, one of the first doctors to defy openly the authority of the Church by performing dissection on the human body. At a time when surgery was still associated both with manual labour and the mysteries of ritual, Mondeville sought to liberate the body from its metaphysical associations and place its study firmly in the realm of science. Through a close and scholarly examination of Mondeville's language, Pouchelle traces the complex imagery which depicted the body and its functions, including digestions, pregnancy and illness. Pouchelle describes the ambivalent attitudes towards surgeons, as men who were both mystical and holy but also unclean because of their contact with blood. The author focuses on dissection, a process which had to be veiled in ritual in order to circumvent the taboo of opening a corpse. She shows how the 14th century world view, which saw the body as a microcosm of its surroundings, still has resonances in the language of the 20th century. This is a study of the workings of language and the imagination in relation to the history of the body. It will be of interest to medievalists and historians of medicine, to anthropologists and social historians and also to anyone interested in the history of symbolism and the human body.