Barbara Baert, Anita Traninger, and Catrien Santing, eds. *Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*.

Intersections: Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture 28. Leiden: Brill, 2013. xx + 312 pp. $171. ISBN: 978-90-04-25354-4.

Detached heads have become a popular topic in studies of medieval and early modern literature and culture in the last few years. Patricia Palmer's recent work, *The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue* (2014), joins two others published by Brill (Tracy and Massey, eds., *Heads Will Roll* [2012] and Baert, *Caput Johannis in Disco* [2012]). *Disembodied Heads* adds an interesting dimension to this current scholarly discussion, invoking images of floating heads on early modern ruffs, head sculptures offered on platters, and paintings where the dislocated head resembles the artist.

The strongest aspect of this collection is its attention to visual representations of severed heads and the art historical analysis presented in several of the ten essays. The editors could not have known about the impending proliferation of this subject, and therefore can be forgiven for the more general surveys provided by some of the contributions. Unfortunately, the articles lack a certain amount of cohesion, and only some acknowledge their relationship with other pieces in the volume. At times the essays seem to speak only to a specialist audience; some do not provide translations for non-English quotations, and assume a certain amount of familiarity from what should be a fairly diverse audience.

The introduction is clear and cogent, explaining the volume's particular emphasis on literal and metaphorical representations of disembodied heads — not necessarily decapitated, but removed through visual illusion as well as human instrument. Of particular interest is the challenge to the "historical hierarchy of human organs" (1), and the focus on the significance of the head in religious, medical, scientific, political, historical, and art historical contexts.

The venerated skull of Adam begins this foray into the variety of ways in which the head figured in historical narrative and iconography. Marina Montesano offers an insightful analysis of images that place Adam's skull at the base of the cross on Golgotha, and the origins of this motif that juxtapose Adam with Christ. The final essay by Catrien Santing indirectly responds to Montesano by reevaluating the

primacy of the head in medieval and early modern thought, offering the heart as an alternative based on textual and medical sources.

Robert Mills broadly discusses the phenomena of talking heads, narrowing on two specific case studies of binary responses to these loquacious entities. Mills makes a compelling connection between the association of the inorganic, mechanical talking head with malevolent advice and the organic, decapitated head as a font of wisdom and pure speech. He omits references to notable examples, like that in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but touches on fertile ground for talking-head narratives, of which there are several in a variety of locations and languages.

Beheading as a popular mode of execution in hagiography is the centerpiece of Esther Cohen's sweeping analysis of the meaning of the head in medieval culture. She notes, as several of the contributors do, that beheading was actually a fairly rare occurrence in medieval jurisprudence, largely reserved for transgressive nobility. Touching on some of the same sources as Mills and Montesano, Cohen argues that there is a symbiotic relationship between the development of judicial beheading and the intellectual debate about the head as the locus of the soul and the center of human identity.

Several of the articles deal with heads as reliquaries (or head reliquaries), as participants in the evolution of their own cults, as signifiers of power, and as objects of devotion. Montgomery discusses walking heads in the cults of cephalophores like Saint Denis, while Baert extends her analysis of the *Johannesschüssel* that appears in her 2012 monograph on the material culture of the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Kapustka follows Baert's analysis with his own argument about the political uses to which images and supposed pieces of John the Baptist's head were put in the Silesian capital Wrocław, and Touber explains the revival of head relics as a tool of the Counter-Reformation. Koomen and Watteeuw each interrogate the artistic value of decollation and self-representation.

Disembodied Heads is a valuable addition to the recent chorus of voices raised in unison about the significance of the head in medieval and early modern culture, its implications for understanding the nature of humanity, and the essence of the human spirit.

LARISSA TRACY
Longwood University