



Susanne Scholz

BODY NARRATIVES

Writing the Nation and Fashioning
the Subject in Early Modern England

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For Gisela and Gisela

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A Note on the Text

I have, as far as possible, retained original spelling, but have silently expanded contractions, given modern equivalents of obsolete letters, and modernized punctuation where necessary. When quoting from classical and medieval texts, I have used modern translations, or early modern ones when the argument required it.

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Introduction

'Bodies,' writes John Donne, 'are ours, though they'are not wee',¹ summarizing a central tenet of modern subjectivity: 'we' are separated from our bodies, and though we possess them, they are no constitutive part of our 'selves'. In contrast to this apparently modern notion, throughout much of the period covered in this book, man was conceived as 'a little world made cunningly',² as a microcosm of a greater order which contained all parts of creation in condensed form and thus constituted God's likeness in the flesh. Its 'medical' configuration, the humoral body, was conceived as in constant flux, with insubstantial margins and inseparable links to all parts of the creation. It seems, however, that what is now regarded as an opposition between disembodied and microcosmic versions of the self was not conceived as contradictory at the time, and the more or less unproblematic coexistence in early modern England of different ways of conceptualizing the body is aptly illustrated by the fact that both the above quotations derive from one and the same poet.

Recent findings about the history of the body have alerted us to the fact that bodies were perceived differently in the early modern period. It is by now almost a truism that different historical times conceive of the same item in different ways, taking recourse to culture-specific patterns of description. In the case of the human body, however, the insistence on the historical and cultural contingency of our descriptive categories seems to contradict not only our perception but also our own experience of our bodies. While we (depending on our ideological locations) more or less emphatically embrace the idea of the fundamental historicity of cultural categories, we only hesitantly accept the idea that our body, this most 'natural' basis of human experience, could be similarly historical. Historicizing the body means deconstructing the

implicit nature–culture dualism that traditionally prevails in historical description, which assumes the human body to be the unchangeable substratum on which culture and history imprint their traces. Taking the historicity of the body seriously demands that we abandon this nature–culture dualism that is also, somehow, an inside–outside split, and that we regard it as the effect of a certain descriptive pattern that emerged at a specific point in the history of Western cultures. But the conception of the body as perceived and thus *written* differently in different historical or cultural settings still retains the idea of a natural, prediscursive body. ‘Historicity’ here also implies that the body in different historical periods was ‘produced’ differently, by normative discourses that did not get imprinted on its surface but which, as Judith Butler insists, structure the very shape in which the body materializes and then proclaim the result to be ‘natural’.³ Thus it is my intention to demonstrate how the human body was constituted differently from today in various discourses in the early modern period, how they effected and ‘produced’ the body as the ‘natural’ base of our thought about historical change.

The early modern period is traditionally regarded as a time of important social, political, and economic alterations, and likewise as the beginning of an epistemological shift during which the universalist notion of order which made sense of the phenomena of the world by way of a hierarchy of analogies and correspondences gave way to an *epistème* that we see, at least in part, as the beginning of our own ways of generating meaning. On a very abstract level, this epistemological shift could be described as the tendency to sever the ties between microcosm and macrocosm, as an impetus to isolate worldly phenomena and internalize their meaning instead of attributing signification from the point of an overarching structure of correspondences held in place, ultimately, by God. This shift in the epistemological framework of things effected all kinds of alterations on various levels of early modern cultures. One of the outcomes of this shift, and one which is not usually perceived by those that have analysed it⁴ as completed before the eighteenth century, is the development of a medical discourse of the human body. Certainly, the human body had been the focus of ‘medical’ attention before that, but it had not been the object of a discourse, by which I mean a set of texts, practices, institutions, forms of knowledge, ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and social power-relations, all of which constituted the body as an object of a scientific gaze quite separate from its ‘possessor’s’ location in the world and society.⁵

Arguably, this is not the way in which bodies were constituted in the Renaissance; and yet some aspects of early modern ways of seeing the body can be thought to be adaptable into later 'scientific' discourses about the human frame. I am quite aware that this can be construed as a teleological argument, and am convinced that we cannot escape the teleologies involved in describing early modern approaches to the human body in the light of our own thought about our bodies: any gaze into the past can only render its otherness in terms and categories provided by our own location in history. But besides the inevitable teleologies which come with historical hindsight, there are others that result from our seeing only the 'progressive' element in early modern discourses about the body, which then conduce to a view of Renaissance 'science' as inevitably leading to our modern ways of describing the body. Retaining the awareness that many options coexisted at this point in history in turn raises the urgent question of how and why certain paradigms became hegemonic, while others disappeared as not telling the truth about the body of man.

The destabilizing effects of a historicization of the body for our own cultural discourses become quite evident when focusing on the gendered body and the description of sexual difference. In the microcosmic paradigm, so Thomas Laqueur tells us, there could be only *one* body, the image on earth of the one God, and this body, whose pure idea resided with God, existed in two possible versions which were differentiated according to their degree of perfection.⁶ The male body version, due to its heat-induced purity, was nearer to the divine ideal, and was thus conceived as the norm, while the female version was characterized by its deficiency in heat. Heat was also the factor that led to different body morphologies for men and women: it 'forced' the male genitalia outward, while the female remained inside. Evidently, this way of making sense of what could be perceived on the surface of the bodies was gradually replaced by a mode of description that rendered the female body as fundamentally different from that of the male, a difference that was later thought to be essentially linked to body morphology and proved by the science of 'anatomy'. Although I agree with Laqueur that this process of differentiation did not develop into a separate 'female anthropology' as a result of an essential sexual dimorphism before the late eighteenth century, I do not share his contention that the early modern period described female bodies exclusively in terms pertaining to the male normative body. Even if the microcosmic paradigm was still called upon to authorize 'medical' observation, female bodies were more and more subject to special scrutiny, focusing

on their generative capacities. And although this may be a way of making sense according to a natural teleology that tied in perfectly with a microcosmic paradigm, it definitely meant that female bodies were perceived, described, and finally constituted as different. The one body that had accommodated both sexes gradually developed gendered emphases: while in the male microcosmic body, godlikeness shifted from the body to the mind, the female microcosmic body became uterocentric, a dissociation that was only at one remove from discourses conceptualizing male and female bodies as insurmountably different.

The fundamental change in the 'order of things' that occurred in the early modern period in Europe had tremendous repercussions on all levels of early modern culture and society. In the area of socio-economic organization, early modern England experienced enormous alterations and restructurings concerning urban development, banking and trade, and increase in manufacturing, with a concomitant demand for credit and capital. On the demographic level, too, things changed rapidly; inflation and unemployment caused a breakdown of rural community structures and a gradual restructuring of the social order that entailed a high degree of social instability. In addition, the Reformation effected a reorientation of the single believer away from a community-centred belief towards an unmediated, intimate relation with his or her God, a move which strengthened a feeling of personal responsibility that carried a strong individualizing impetus. Rapid social change enabled groups and individuals that had previously been excluded from social and political agency to enter the field of social action, which generated tremendous anxieties about perceived hierarchies in Tudor England. In the domain of political order, overarching power structures such as the Holy Roman Empire or the Universal Church had disintegrated through the impact of political struggles for sovereignty and the Reformation, leaving a power vacuum that was soon to be filled by the universalist claims of sovereign states and separate religious confessions. Thus on the socio-political level, too, the ties were severed that had previously united the European political 'universe' under a single power. The sovereign states and also the communities inhabiting them – and this especially applies to the diasporic community of Protestant England – felt the need to counter the loss of an unifying ideological structure by individual integrational concepts that would provide them with a feeling of belonging and significance. In the words of G. R. Elton, 'A national unit came to be, not the tacitly accepted necessity it had been for some time, but the consciously

desired goal.⁷ In England a concept of nationhood emerged that aimed at ascertaining the country's imperial stature and that would serve as an integrational concept of loyalty modelled on, and yet in contradistinction to, earlier claims for an overarching European unity. Providing the individuated members of the body of the former *Societas Christiana* with an ideological centre, the collective identity could refashion itself as a 'universe' in its own right: the 'realm' of England became an 'empire'. The models within which these claims and self-definitions were voiced largely derived from older, often decidedly monarchical, discourses and images which were redefined in accordance with the new social and cultural constellations. In this context, the English 'nation' did not develop in the form of a nation-state but was articulated within the confines of a dynastic, quasi-absolutist state, with specific implications for its distribution of political agency as well as its forms of representation. Among these, the medieval model of the King's Two Bodies retained a prominent place, but was reworked to match the requirements of the current situation. In its Elizabethan use, it merged the juridical fiction of the 'crown', which comprised the synchronic, horizontal dimension of the corporation, head and body of the body politic in the present, with the notion of 'royal dignity', conceived as a diachronic, vertical, one-man corporation which guaranteed dynastic continuity.⁸ The union of these two concepts in the person of the monarch enabled an appropriation of the traditional organological body metaphor, but with an absolutist bias: in the Elizabethan body politic, the head had absorbed the body. In its conjunction with images of the Queen's virginity, it linked a fiction of continuity through time with an image of territorial integrity; it envisaged synchronic and diachronic stability in the image of the Queen's inviolate body. Obviously, this constitutive fiction drew on a concept of the human body as a microcosm of the larger universe: only if the body of the ruler could be metonymically linked to the universe could it symbolize divine order on earth. As such, the ruler's body is different in kind from the bodies of his or her subjects, and gender is of no consequence here. We will see how the disjunctive impulse of both scientific thinking and nation-building gradually interfere with this integrative image of organic wholeness and take it to its semantic limits in the cult of Elizabeth I.

It has been argued that the English nation in the sixteenth century came into being not as a conscious political concept, but in the form of cultural productions, and pre-eminently of texts. Richard Helgersson has claimed that 'nation-ness' in sixteenth-century England was mainly

articulated in language, and that those who envisaged it were also those who were most affected by the dislocation of the old order and social status. Being members of an élite by virtue of their humanist education, but with no access to state power nor participation in courtly politics, 'these poets sought to articulate a national community whose existence and eminence would then justify their desire to become its literary spokesmen'.⁹ In historical narratives, chronicles, chivalric romance, history plays, and topographic descriptions these 'younger Elizabethans' sought to draft a political entity that would acknowledge their abilities and assign them a position of power within the cultural system. In that respect these authors of the 'nation' were by definition at variance with an absolutist sovereign and a dynastic state which had proved unwilling to accept of their services in more than cursory fashion. Nevertheless, much of this 'national' sentiment was voiced in the genres and imagery of courtly panegyrics, assigning to the Queen an ambiguous position as the focus of a loyalty that was ultimately bound to transcend her. The authors of the texts I have selected for my readings of English nation-building in early modern England, Edmund Spenser, Walter Raleigh, and Philip Sidney, to name but the most prominent ones, were Elizabethans of the younger generation, born around 1550, who were intensely dissatisfied with their social status as well as the politics of the establishment and the position it assigned to England and Protestantism, and who felt the need to change this by drafting their versions of national greatness. Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* in particular, appearing in two instalments in 1590 and 1596, took the challenge to write England's imperial stature seriously by virtue of its epic form as well as its Arthurian contents. As a self-declared national epic, this most sustained attempt in English Renaissance literature to write the 'body' of the nation by writing (or rather, scattering) the body of the Queen also testifies to the difficulties besetting the enterprise of providing coherent narratives of England's greatness in a courtly context presided over by a female monarch.

The implications of a definition of 'nationhood' as being constituted primarily through language, and of the nation as a narrative, are obvious.¹⁰ Requiring a focus on the performative aspects of the medium and the impossibility of closure inherent in any kind of textuality, the idea of the nation as a narrative shifts our analytical focus from historical and sociological methods of investigation to textual ones, including the 'textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative stratagems'¹¹ which structure the national narrative. As Saussurean linguistics has taught us, language does not function

referentially, and rather than merely reflecting an extratextual reality it constructs its objects. Additionally, these poets' quasi-didactic visions of national identity were meant to be translated into social practice. So if, as Helgerson claims, 'England writ large' was the goal of various discursive communities' endeavours to articulate versions of English nationhood,¹² thereby constructing a cultural system on which the loyalties of Englishmen and -women could focus, how do we define the relationship between these texts, social and cultural practices, and courtly politics?

As Benedict Anderson reminds us, 'identity... because it cannot be remembered, must be narrated'.¹³ His by now classical definition of the nation as an 'imagined community' has opened up the possibility to conceive of national identity as originating from a representational process taking place in the medium of language. This does not mean, however, that English nationhood remained a textual affair. The reciprocal concern with the 'textuality of history' and the 'historicity of texts'¹⁴ which has been practised for almost two decades under the name of 'cultural poetics' or 'cultural materialism' in Renaissance criticism has made us realize that literature is one domain of cultural production that is inextricably linked with other fields of cultural production, and with the social power structure, in that it reflects and likewise creates social reality. It is the reality of the imagined that is at issue here: through its implication in a web of power relations that pervades the cultural system, textualization is not merely a fictionalizing process that mimetically reflects an extratextual reality, but is intricately linked with social and cultural power structures. Elizabethan attempts to imagine Englishness articulated the differentiating ideology of nationhood in the discursive communities of literature, law, religion, history, and economy, not only in the texts they produced but also in their cultural practices and institutions. What their cultural texts have in common is that they are structured according to a narrative logic, that is to say, they organize their subject matter as a chain of causally connected events teleologically moving towards the goal of full realization of national autonomy within a linear time scale. In this context, literature and history occupy special positions because they enable visions of the nation's past which can be taken as utopian views and aspirations to future greatness. Again, the 'nation' as imagined in various texts and images is productive of certain practices, institutions, ways of thinking that are by no means fictitious, but are real. In telling stories of origin and destination, these texts determine the political actions and cultural practices of the present.

Drawing on the seminal work of Norbert Elias,¹⁵ who has convincingly demonstrated how, in the early modern period, individual and collective bodies were being shaped in a dialectical relation, and of Mary Douglas,¹⁶ who has shown how a culture's way of imagining itself in the image of the body is inextricably linked to its norms of individual body behaviour, I argue that social and somatic formations emerged in a relation of reciprocity in early modern England. Both body and nation were imagined as contained, independent structures controlled by an inner core that could be described as an internalization of God at the centre of the new identity formation. In the chapters of Part II will attempt to trace the emergence of this pattern of identity formation in early modern texts about bodily comportment and individual behaviour. In these discourses, focusing on personal and bodily demeanour, the subject's body was constituted as a product of culture, purged of its instances of corporeality, which were reconceptualized as 'nature'. At the same time, this entailed a severe devaluation of femininity as identified with corporeality. Bodies were being 'produced' through the performative reiteration of cultural norms concerning bodily demeanour, gestures, dress, and other instances of (not always conscious) self-fashioning, as having one of two possible genders. Thus I contend that, in the texts analyzed here, emphatically gendered bodies were constituted as early as the 1590s, implying that, at that early date, subjectivity was almost exclusively located in the male body. As Foucault has argued about classical 'techniques of the self',¹⁷ only he who is able to achieve a certain self-relation that is coded masculine, only he who has taken himself as an object of ethical scrutiny, who has gained control over his inner 'nature', exterritorializing part of himself as 'other', can rightfully claim to be called a 'subject'. This self-government is isomorphous with political conceptions of government, both being predicated upon the domination of an – often feminized – other within the self: 'governing oneself, managing one's estate, and participating in the administration of the city were three practices of the same type. ... The master of himself and the master of others received the same training.'¹⁸ To be a man was (and is) no natural, biological, or anthropological given, but the result of a complex historical process. In regard of his body constitution and self-relation, fashioned by both cultural discourses and power structures, the subject emerged as inherently masculine. In this concept of gender performativity, agency inheres in a process of reiteration that produced subjects who in turn claimed to be the originators of their actions, but who in fact drew on norms and discourses beyond their own making. The literary

and didactic texts analysed here – the quest for Temperance in *The Faerie Queene*, Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, as well as the host of courtesy manuals current in sixteenth-century England – not only mirrored but also, by providing images of perfection and accomplished virtue, *produced* the subject's new body in accordance with the demands of social, economic, and political discourses. As writing constituted one of the modes of self-fashioning, subjectivity as it emerged from the literature of the time assigned a certain function to the female; the female beloved, in the prevailing Petrarchist mode, was instrumentalized to constitute male authorship/*auctoritas*: the scattering of the female body guaranteed the wholeness of the male subject. Thus I investigate the uses of images of the female body in relation to masculine identity formation which are also relevant for the collective identity's imaginings of the dangers besetting it from inside and from without. It is my contention that the narrative of the nation is matched, on the level of body politics, by disciplinary discourses on habitus, gesture, apparel, and speech. Again, performativity is a major issue here, translating textual prescription into body practice, thus effecting a body formation that is constitutive not only of individual but also of national identity.

The obvious linkage in Elizabethan courtly panegyrics of social and somatic formation is, of course, the 'virginity' of the Queen. I propose to read Elizabeth's 'virginity' as a political metaphor which, as many commentators have demonstrated, tropes the integrity of the island realm in the inviolability of the Queen's body. Focusing on the micro-cosmic, divine, perfect, *and* female body of Elizabeth-as-England, courtly panegyrics envisaged the nation as a paradisiacal territory safe from encroachment by its enemies, yet always under threat: a nourishing and autonomous, if fragile, locus of peace and plenty. Yet while the paradoxical combination of virginity and fruitfulness – as well as the Edenic associations of the place – render this as a highly aestheticized, quasi-otherworldly *imago* that structured human endeavours for collective identity on earth, the notion of the territorialized female body nevertheless drew on the Queen's body as a physical entity. In a (decidedly absolutist) pictorial overlap of the Queen's natural and political bodies, the collective body of the nation was given 'a local habitation and a name' in its identification with the royal body. This reading of the political implications of the Queen's inviolate state must not, however, exclude from sight the image's somatic referent: Elizabeth's 'virginity' is no dead metaphor. On the contrary, the moral state of virginity and the bodily practice of chastity were at the centre of disciplinary discourses focusing on the containment of the female

body, and as such they had a decided impact on actual bodily comportment. It was not only the containment of the Queen's body that mirrored and, in a way, guaranteed the nation's integrity: this was, in turn, to be reflected in the closure of every woman's body. This preoccupation with drawing and fortifying boundaries took place on various levels of early modern English society, and it surfaces in the pictorial representations of Queen and nation.

So far I have argued for the reciprocity of social and somatic formation in the constitution of modern identity. How does this relate to what I have stated before about the historicity of body perception and constitution? Though the body image has a long tradition of depicting a unity of diverse elements, it is by no means a static universal of political theory, but is closely linked to cultural discourses and the respective community's way of imagining itself. Thus it is important to analyse *which* features are being chosen for representation in the respective body image: it is by no means coincidental that Elizabethan depictions of the national community put special emphasis on the body boundaries and stressed its fortification and defensiveness. Yet the ongoing shift in body paradigms also affected representations of the Queen and nation. Images of wholeness and spiritual as well as physical perfection clearly drew on a microcosmic paradigm, rendering the sovereign's person as divine guarantor of social order. Alterations in this way of generating meaning were necessarily also reflected in the political body image. While the strong emphasis on body boundaries in the earlier images already pointed at a loss of organic coherence and unifying power of the sovereign's body, which could provide stability only by means of enforced closure, in later representations the femininity of the Queen's body became a problem. In the chapters of Part II I discuss the gradual replacement of representations which draw directly on the virginal body of the Queen by images which render her in the form of disembodied, transcendent goddesses, as a corollary of these shifts in body perception and constitution. Different body paradigms were at the base of different forms of representing the Queen and nation, and gradually the connection of femininity and corporeality undermined efforts to depict the nation in the image of the Queen's body. The female body emerged in various cultural discourses as a particular, porous, penetrable entity that must be rigidly policed in order to contain its potential subversiveness. It was rendered as an instance of the 'other', and was used in this sense, for example, in representations of the indigenous peoples of the New World. In readings of Spenser's