

FLESH AND SPIRIT



AN ANTHOLOGY OF
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S WRITING

Edited by

Rachel Adcock, Sara Read & Anna Ziomek

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century women's writing

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Thank you both.

Chronology

- 1558 Accession of Elizabeth I (Protestant), causing restrictions for Catholic and Puritan worship
- 1591 William Perkins's *A Golden Chain*
- 1603 Accession of James I and VI of Scotland
- 1605 (Catholic) Gunpowder Plot
- 1610 Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible (Catholic) completed abroad
- 1611 Translation of King James Bible completed
- 1620 Puritans leave for New England
- 1621 Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*
- 1622 Elizabeth Clinton's *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie*; compiling of the commonplace book of Brilliana Conway (later Lady Harley)
- 1623 Gertrude More co-founds Our Lady of Comfort at Cambrai, France
- 1625 Accession of Charles I, married to a French Catholic
- 1629 Charles dissolves Parliament until 1640
- 1633 William Laud made Archbishop of Canterbury (executed 1645)
- 1636 Outbreak of plague
- 1642 Outbreak of First Civil War; theatres closed
- 1643 Solemn League and Covenant agreed between England and Scotland; death of Brilliana, Lady Harley, following a siege at her family castle at Brampton Bryan

Chronology

- 1644 First Baptist *Confession of Faith*
- 1646 End of First Civil War
- 1647 Lady Mary Carey commences her meditations and poetry; the Quaker George Fox begins public preaching
- 1648 Outbreak of Second Civil War; Westminster Shorter Catechism presented to Parliament
- 1649 End of Second Civil War; Charles I beheaded for treason; England becomes a Commonwealth
- 1649–53 Rump Parliament, later dissolved by Oliver Cromwell (Puritan)
- 1652 *Eliza's Babes*
- 1653 Barebones Parliament; Oliver Cromwell then becomes the Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland
- 1656 Elizabeth Major's *Honey on the Rod*
- 1657 Posthumous publication of Gertrude More's *The Holy Practises of a Devine Lover*
- 1658 Death of Cromwell; posthumous publication of Gertrude More's *The Spiritual Exercises*
- 1660 Restoration of the monarchy with Charles II; theatres reopened
- 1662 Act of Uniformity; Lady Elizabeth Delaval begins her meditations
- 1663 Katherine Sutton's *A Christian Womans Experiences* published abroad; the anonymous *Conversion Exemplified* published after the author's death
- 1665 Great Plague
- 1666 Great Fire of London
- 1671 Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book*
- 1672 Royal Declaration of Indulgence (a measure towards some religious liberty but withdrawn a year later)
- 1683 Hannah Allen's *A Narrative of God's Gracious Dealings*
- 1685 Accession of James II (Catholic)
- 1688 Glorious Revolution: accession of William III and Mary II (Protestant)

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Introduction

In a 1629 letter written to her mother, Lady Joan Barrington, Lady Elizabeth Masham, wife of the MP for Colchester, commented that ‘all the distempers of our bodies, which must need be many while we live here [on earth], may be a [...] means of the curing the great distemper of our souls, and may make us long for that home where all sorrows have an end and we shall triumph in joy and glory forever more’.¹ The occasion of Masham’s letter seems to have been concern for her mother’s health (both spiritual and physical) following the sudden death of her husband in the previous year.² Lady Joan’s grief, which included questioning why God had punished her in such a way, manifested itself in a deep melancholic illness, which was rationalised in the seventeenth century as a physical reflection of her troubled soul. Belief in God’s displeasure could often cause men and women to question whether they were beloved of God, and whether they were among his chosen people. Masham’s remark, made by a daughter seeking to reassure her mother, explains that bodily discomfort was to be expected while on earth, as God deadened sin within each individual believer, before they were made ready for eternal life. While staying healthy meant taking appropriate care of both the body and the soul, the flesh and the spirit, resignation to illness was often conceived as a way of showing your acceptance of God’s will. This meant that, for some of the women anthologised here, a miscarriage, for example, was taken as

1 Arthur Searle, ed., *Barrington Family Letters: 1628–1632* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1983), p. 92.

2 Lady Joan Barrington [*née* Williams or Cromwell] (c.1558–1641) and her husband, Sir Francis, were strict Calvinists and had brought their family up as Puritans. Sean Kelsey, ‘Barrington, Joan, Lady Barrington (c.1558–1641)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

a sign of God's displeasure over a lack of piety, or a reminder that life and death were both subject to God's ordinance and pleasure. In her letter, Lady Masham reassured her mother that illness could serve as a way of reminding a woman that her earthly suffering would end when she was admitted to heaven. This anthology will demonstrate several of the ways in which early modern women, of varying religious beliefs, lived in, cared for and accounted for a body in which spirituality and physical health were intrinsically interconnected.

In the seventeenth century, England was a Protestant country and the nature of worship was controlled by the Church of England, the state church. At church, on Sunday, every person in the country (provided they had not absented themselves, illegally) would have heard the minister read from *The Book of Common Prayer* in English (rather than Latin), first introduced a century before as part of the Reformation in England. The only deviation from this was during the mid-century Civil Wars and Cromwell's Protectorate. *The Book of Common Prayer* assumed that a connection between the flesh and the spirit was natural when it asked the congregation at Holy Communion to offer 'ourselves, our souls, and bodies', indicating that a human body was made up of these two interconnecting entities.³ Danger was often thought to threaten the soul and body simultaneously. A catechism added to the prayer book in 1662 indicated that the function of saying the Lord's Prayer was to 'pray unto God, that he will send us all things that be needful both for our souls and bodies; [...] and that it will please him to save and defend us in all dangers ghostly [spiritual] and bodily'.⁴ How to combat these threats to soul and body depended on how a believer viewed the relationship between the two entities, and where they thought the threats originated. For instance, depending on a person's religious or medical beliefs, they might view melancholia (an illness which shares some symptoms with what we now recognise as depression) as a punishment from God which made the sufferer more prone to the temptations of Satan, as evidence of unpardonable sin, as an imbalance of bodily fluids or humours, as a result of spending too much time in private study or, most often, as a mixture of all these things. Women, however, were constructed by seventeenth-century ideologies as generally weaker and more dysfunctional than men in both soul and body, and so more susceptible to attacks on the spirit and the flesh. These understandings stemmed

3 Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 138.

4 Ibid., p. 429.

from Eve's precedent, when she submitted to the Devil's temptations in the Garden of Eden, meaning she and her female descendants were punished (spiritually and bodily) with painful childbirth. This anthology of women's works seeks to foreground women's explorations of the relationship between their bodies and souls partly in order to contrast them with these male-authored ideologies, but also to highlight contemporary understandings of the relationship between the flesh and spirit during important life events and religious awakenings. For instance, did women always believe that their bodies were sinful? Were pain and despair always understood as punishments? And if illness was understood as both a spiritual and a bodily problem, how was it cured? The selected women's writings included in this anthology go some way to answering these important questions.

This anthology of seventeenth-century women's writings makes use of often overlooked or underutilised works to highlight religious and bodily contexts, while also making them easily accessible, and in some cases newly available, to scholars and students of the early modern period. The prose writings of Lady Mary Carey, the commonplace book of Brilliana Conway (Lady Harley) and the anonymous female deathbed testimony *Conversion Exemplified*, have never been extracted in modern editions, and the writings of Harley, Lady Elizabeth Delaval and Gertrude More have appeared only in nineteenth- and twentieth-century editions. Considering these particular works through religious and medical frameworks will not only add to scholarship's understanding of the full historical context of the ways in which women related to religious doctrine in the period, but will also indicate how they saw their bodies as spiritually endowed. That is to say, for many early modern people, physical bodily change was thought to be the result of God's agency acting directly upon them. In recent times, scholars have drawn attention to both 'the turn to religion' and the 'return to the body' in early modern studies, in order to understand and more accurately explain the explorations of human experience that the period produced. Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti's well-known article 'The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies' recognised that religion constituted 'a deep psychological and emotional experience', as well as a political and social one, and recognised that in order to understand more fully religious experience in this period, scholars should 'acknowledge the need to incorporate the imagination and the physical in cultural-historical analyses'.⁵ This anthology does so by drawing

5 Ken Jackson and A. F. Marotti, 'The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies', *Criticism*, 46 (2004), 167–90 (p. 169).

attention to the importance of studying representations of the fleshly, physical senses in works that sought, predominantly, to communicate the vividness of religious experience, and also explores the significance of the religious imagination in medical treatises. It will highlight, in particular, how women experienced spiritual and physical changes and contribute to ongoing explorations of whether religious experience was gendered. These extracts demonstrate the various ways in which early modern women negotiated the relationship between their fleshly, physical suffering and their spiritual state.

The dialogue between flesh and spirit

Understandings of the relationship between the body and soul in the seventeenth century were heavily influenced by early Greek philosophy. Platonic philosophy held that the soul and body were two warring entities; the body was like an earthly prison for the immortal soul before it was freed on the body's death. As Roy Porter has noted, 'throughout medieval and, in due course, Reformation and Counter-Reformation thinking, the human animal continued to be defined as *homo duplex*, the union incurably discordant, of earthly body and immortal soul'.⁶ Aristotelian theories of the body/soul relationship, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on the body working as an instrument of the soul. The two entities were believed inseparable and therefore one could not function without the other. Whereas in Plato's works there was a moral distinction made between the corrupt, earthly body and the immortal soul, in Aristotelian philosophy there was no such moral distinction. At the Reformation, the theologian John Calvin also denied the moral responsibility of body or soul, assigning to both the responsibility for original sin inherited from Adam. He wrote:

Corruption commencing in Adam, is, by perpetual descent, conveyed from those preceding to those coming after them. The cause of the

6 Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason: The Modern Foundations of Body and Soul* (Oxford and New York: Norton, 2003), p. 37. For example, according to Pythagoras's theory, quoted by James Luchte, 'So long as it [the soul] is imprisoned in the bodily tomb it is impure, tainted by the evil substance of the body'. James Luchte, *Pythagoras and the Doctrine of Transmigration: Wandering Souls* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 58. Psychologically – in terms of actual experience – this meant that the soul was profoundly conscious of an internal conflict of good and evil, the war in the members. This conflict dominates religious experience. In philosophical expression, it gives rise to the axiom of dualism. As Luchte writes (*ibid.*): 'In the world as in the soul there is a real conflict or two opposite powers – good and evil, light and darkness'.

contagion is neither in the substance of the flesh nor the soul, but God was pleased to ordain that those gifts which he had bestowed on the first man, that man should lose as well for his descendants as for himself.⁷

Both body and soul were believed to be corrupt until a regeneration process had taken place within the believer, equivalent to putting 'on the new man' of Ephesians 4:24. For Calvin, following St Paul, flesh and spirit did not refer directly to body and soul but to the 'two ways of life which the whole man can choose to follow'.⁸ Galatians 5:17 depicts a warring of flesh against spirit ('For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other'), where the 'Spirit' referred to a group of people who are spiritually regenerate, who 'tend towards what is good'.⁹ Therefore, 'the Spirit is not from nature', Calvin writes, 'but from regeneration'.¹⁰ The conflict between flesh and spirit is also described in Romans 7:22–3: 'I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members [limbs], warring against the law of my mind'. For Calvin, only those who were 'regenerated by the Spirit of God' experienced such a struggle between flesh and spirit within themselves.¹¹ In the literature of the seventeenth century, however, body and soul, flesh and spirit, could be used interchangeably as both concrete, literal terms and as figurative representations of the war against sin inside each individual believer.

By the early seventeenth century, English Protestantism, influenced by both Calvin's doctrinal arguments and Greek thought, was encouraging believers to look inside themselves in order to discern the conflict between the sinful flesh and the regenerative spirit. This kind of introspection produced a growing number of poetic dialogues, often didactic in tone, that positioned the flesh and spirit in the midst of an argument about which one was the dominant force. For instance, the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet included one such dialogue between 'The Flesh and the Spirit' in her *Several Poems* (published posthumously in 1678), where the two entities fought against each other as sisters: one was Flesh, 'who had her eye/On worldly wealth and vanity', and the other, dominant sister was 'Spirit, who did rear/Her thoughts unto a

7 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), pp. 151–2.

8 Rosalie Osmond, *Mutual Accusation: Seventeenth-Century Body and Soul Dialogues in Their Literary and Theological Context* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 18.

9 Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 175.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

higher sphere'.¹² Body-and-soul dialogues had also been popular in the medieval period, but these staged arguments were mostly presented taking place after death and before the Last Judgement. Seventeenth-century dialogues tend, instead, to focus on the struggle going on inside *living* believers, and are therefore similar to spiritual autobiographies of this period. Indeed, as the writings of Lady Mary Carey and Elizabeth Major included in this anthology show, a spiritual autobiography could be constructed using just such a dialogue. Bradstreet's poem depicts this struggle in miniature, giving Spirit the space to dominate the argument and have the last word, though also admitting that the conflict will continue until Flesh is 'laid in th' dust':

Spirit: Be still, thou unregenerate part,
Disturb no more my settled heart,
For I have vowed (and so will do)
Thee as a foe still to pursue,
And combat with thee will and must
Until I see thee laid in th' dust.
Sisters we are, yea twins we be,
Yet deadly feud 'twixt thee and me,
For from one father are we not.
Thou by old Adam wast begot,
But my arise is from above,
Whence my dear father I do love.

(37–48)

Here, Flesh (sin) is inherited from Adam, while the Spirit (the regenerative part) can only originate from God. The two are twins, usually thought to represent harmony, yet these twins have different fathers and war with each other over who inherits the whole man.¹³ Spirit demonstrates that she comes from God, and according to Puritan thinking was created first, so is the 'elder' of the twins. Two stanzas from another poetic dialogue, 'A Short Dialogue between Flesh and

12 Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 231–4 (p. 231, lines 5–8).

13 The idea that non-identical twins could have different fathers was believed to be caused by a phenomenon known as 'superfetation', which is where a second pregnancy occurred when the mother was already carrying a child. Thomas Browne, seventeenth-century author and physician, insists that there are numerous examples of this phenomenon in the classical texts, including Pliny and Hippocrates, and explains how, by this process, the womb, 'after reception of its proper Tenant, may yet receive a strange and spurious inmate [...] as also in those superconceptions where one child was like the father, the other like the adulterer, the one favoured the servant, the other resembled the master'. Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (London: E. Dod, 1646), p. 150.

Spirit', written in the 1660s by Sarah Davy, who had joined a Puritan 'gathered congregation' which worshipped separately from the state church, also demonstrate the inner conflict between unregenerate and regenerate states of being:

Flesh: Fond soul what aileth thee thus low to deem,
Our pleasure and our comforts here below,
And that thou dost so highly them esteem
As if thou didst not care such things to know
Is it not better mirth for to enjoy,
Which maketh fat the bones and glads the heart,
Then in thy musings thus thy self annoy
At last persuaded be with them to part.

Spirit: Fond fleshly part this all thou hast to say
Cease now with all specious flattering speech,
And never think by all thy pleas to sway
A soul that now is got above thy reach,
All thy suggestions I cannot approve
Seeing in earth thy comforts all do lie
But I much live in flames of heavenly love
With heavenly comforts which will never die.¹⁴

Akin to Bradstreet's poem, Davy's poem in its entirety gives more space to Spirit's argument, as well as the most powerful lines. However, Flesh voices a well-known criticism of religious introspection which Puritans, in particular, encouraged. Self-examination was part of the process of conversion, where believers were meant to look for signs of God's grace and then to record and interpret them. Many undertaking this path became melancholy and 'annoyed' by these 'musings', leading others to observe that the process did more harm than good, but still others, including Davy, were of the opinion that faults could be mended only if they were identified. Davy's conversion narrative, to which this poem is appended, includes her self-examinations as she struggled to fix her faults and rid herself of sin, and giving this advice to the tempting Flesh is therefore significant. Lady Mary Carey's conversion narrative, extracted in this anthology, also utilises a dialogue between Soul and Body, but is remarkable for its comparatively sympathetic treatment of the desires of the Body. However, in Carey's work Body's desire for earthly things is actually a representation of her own desire for God to restore her dead children that he had taken from her. Her conversion narrative is a dramatisation of the struggle to accept God's providence, and to eliminate her own 'selfish' desires, though her way of understanding grief might seem strange to us now. The anonymous

14 Sarah Davy, *Heaven Realis'd* (London: A. P., 1670), pp. 149–50 (p. 149).