

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE HUMAN BODY IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT

EDITED BY CAROLE REEVES



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IN THE AGE OF
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Carole Reeves
July 2009

SERIES PREFACE

A Cultural History of the Human Body is a six-volume series reviewing the changing cultural construction of the human body throughout history. Each volume follows the same basic structure and begins with an outline account of the human body in the period under consideration. Next, specialists examine major aspects of the human body under seven key headings: birth/death, health/disease, sex, medical knowledge/technology, popular beliefs, beauty/concepts of the ideal, marked bodies of gender/race/class, marked bodies of the bestial/divine, cultural representations and self and society. Thus, readers can choose a synchronic or a diachronic approach to the material—a single volume can be read to obtain a thorough knowledge of the body in a given period, or one of the seven themes can be followed through time by reading the relevant chapters of all six volumes, thus providing a thematic understanding of changes and developments over the long term. The six volumes divide the history of the body as follows:

Volume 1: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity* (750 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.)

Volume 2: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age* (500–1500)

Volume 3: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Renaissance* (1400–1650)

Volume 4: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Enlightenment* (1650–1800)

Volume 5: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire* (1800–1920)

Volume 6: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age* (1920–21st Century)

General Editors, Linda Kalof and William Bynum

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Introduction

Enlightenment Bodies

CAROLE REEVES

The Enlightenment was a time when people began to take stock of their intrinsic worth as individuals. This appraisal was different of course from ownership of one's body. Slaves were still property, servants and apprentices were indentured, daughters belonged to fathers and brothers (and wives to husbands), and paupers were tethered to their parish. But there was change in the air and a new optimism born of a freedom to think and the right to challenge. Against a worldwide demographic explosion between the years 1650 and 1800, with its associated urbanization and industrialization, which increased the migratory potential of individuals, families, and groups, persuasive notions of national and personal identity began to develop. These ideas filtered down to even the poorest street beggars, as portrayed so elegantly in Tim Hitchcock's study of beggars and their bodies in eighteenth-century London. The chapters in this book, written by historians of culture, literature, science, and medicine, explore the human body in all its guises from conception and birth to death and beyond, both as a physical and symbolic entity. They reveal its amorphous nature in an age of turbulence and transition as the highways to modernity were forged inexorably through the Western world. The epithets *pliable*, *fragile*, *susceptible*, *manipulative*, *entrepreneurial*, *imaginative*, *jocular*, *deceptive*, *vain*, *proud*, *passionate*, *mutilated*, *stereotyped*, *alert*, *pox-ridden*, *rickety*, *wrong-looking*, *incestuous*, and *dangerously reproductive* have been used by the authors to describe Enlightenment bodies. The Enlightenment celebrated nonconformity as it erased the traces of old mentalities and encouraged individuals to remold themselves as originals.

Fiction emerged as the medium for rethinking the self and trying out new identities,¹ though a great cluster of these narratives explored the lives and deaths of ordinary people.² Popular tales from abroad, particularly the Orient, introduced readers to unfamiliar bodies including the enclosed seraglio body, the foot-bound body, the reincarnated body, and the castrated (eunuchoid) body. The *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, *Turkish Tales*, *Chinese Tales*, and *Mogul Tales* were hybrid East-meets-West fables, but their popularity spawned successful European versions such as Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1722), discussed by Lisa Forman Cody in her chapter on "The Body in Birth and Death," and Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1760–1761).³ The cult of the Gothic, which spawned Frankenstein's mismatched but misunderstood monster, was heralded by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765). Goethe's *Die Braut von Korinth* (1797) capitalized on the epidemic waves of vampirism that swept mid-century Central Europe, although his blood-sucking creature bore little resemblance to the humbler embodied revenants purported to inhabit rural villages.⁴ Nevertheless, the whole issue of resurrection within one's own earthly body and the possibility of resuscitation of the so-called undead were hotly debated, not least among theologians such as the French Dominican Augustin Calmet, who refused to dismiss vampires in principle, and Benito Jerónimo Feijóo, professor of theology at Oviedo, who considered them a mere effect of the imagination.⁵ Thomas Paine's Deist stance that the resurrection of Jesus was a fraud if considered as a miracle but might be explained as a case of apparent death followed by resuscitation,⁶ could theoretically be extended to embodied revenants, especially if they had been victims of violent death or drowning. Being buried alive might also explain their reported forceful resistance to being staked through the heart and decapitated when unearthed. A Society for the Recovery of the Apparently Drowned, founded in Amsterdam in 1767, and its London equivalent, The Royal Humane Society (1774), were the medical profession's response to the resuscitation debate. They aimed to instruct people in life-restoring techniques such as inflating the lungs with bellows, applying electrical stimulation to various parts of the body, and fumigating the rectum with tobacco enemas.

The macabre mystery of death and the possibility of resuscitation drew crowds to executions. From the mid-eighteenth century, enlightened penal reformers in England campaigned to bring order, if not dignity, to the business of capital punishment and the ensuing scramble for a touch of the hanged corpse, proclaimed by folk wisdom to have miraculous healing properties.⁷ Public hangings at Tyburn, London's spectacle of retribution since circa 1300, were abolished in 1783, and public executions in England ceased totally under Queen Victoria in 1888. Conversely, the frequently staged Tyburn riot by ordinary citizens against the surgeons emphasizes the disapprobation and fierce

resistance to the practice of anatomizing hanged murderers at Surgeons' Hall.⁸ As Ruth Richardson discusses in her chapter on the dead body, there was little difference in the public mind between the legal acquisition of bodies from the gibbet and the sordid (and illegal) involvement of anatomists with resurrectionists or body snatchers. Although the rich were seldom the victims of grave robbers, they were not inviolable, as proclaimed by the London surgeon Sir Astley Cooper (1768–1841), who arrogantly maintained that he could procure any body he liked provided the price was right.⁹ Enlightened opinion also abandoned punitiveness for pity in the case of those who chose to take their own lives, whose bodies had, during medieval times (in Christian theology), been denied resurrection by being buried face down in a cemetery and, after the Reformation, at a crossroads with a stake through the heart or mutilated in some way.¹⁰ Suicide was secularized and medicalized as sympathetic coroners returned verdicts of non compos mentis, which sanctioned churchyard burials and, almost as importantly, prevented the victims' assets being forfeited to the Crown.¹¹ The Enlightenment (preceded by the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century) is associated with a general shift from divine dramatics to more secular practices and naturalistic meanings. As suggested by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, Western medicine gradually separated itself from spiritual matters as part of this process, and intellectuals distanced themselves from old magical medicine.¹² After Queen Anne (1702–1714), for example, British monarchs stopped the custom of touch-healing sufferers of scrofula, known as the King's Evil, although in France the Bourbons continued the practice until 1830.¹³ Robert Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), had entertained no doubt that Satan personally and directly visited sinful man with sickness,¹⁴ and the pious trope of vile bodies—dubbed “boxes of poison” by John Donne (1572–1631), poet and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London¹⁵—could be authenticated by the revelations of the microscope, that seventeenth-century dilettante toy, which exposed the teeming mass of repulsive bugs and grubs feeding off them.¹⁶ Plague, consumption, syphilis, and other deadly and disfiguring afflictions proved the infirmities of the flesh and confirmed the association between lust, sin, and suffering.¹⁷ By the end of the eighteenth century, however, such explanations and associations were becoming something of a joke among the elite. When the physician Erasmus Darwin, a beacon of the Enlightenment, was forced to cancel his attendance at a meeting of the Lunar Society, he blamed the devil for

sending the measles with peripneumony amongst nine beautiful children of Lord Pagets's. For I suppose it is a work of the devil! Surely the Lord could never think of amusing himself by setting nine innocent little animals to cough their hearts up?¹⁸

Witchcraft was similarly debunked. The witch was identifiable by the *stigmata diaboli* on her body—moles, warts, birthmarks, blemishes, scars—to be flushed out by the expert gaze of priests, witch finders, and the courts. In accusations of witchcraft, the presence or absence of these distinguishing marks could be a matter of life or death.¹⁹ Like Jane Wenham of Hertfordshire, the last English witch to be condemned (in 1712), most accused of *maleficium* were poor, eccentric, elderly women living in rural communities. As well as a resentment among rationalists against the clergy responsible for whipping up fears about witchcraft for their own power game, there was, as suggested by Daniel Schäffer, a revaluation of old age in the early Enlightenment, which may have contributed to it being recognized as a state of illness and neediness and not only as a natural phase of decay.²⁰ Indeed, as Lisa Forman Cody discusses in the opening chapter of this volume, the medicalization of human existence from birth to death is rooted in the eighteenth century, as are the scientific underpinnings of sexual deviance, racial diversity, criminality, and madness. The early modern insane body was portrayed in theatrical, artistic, and literary conventions as bestial, naked, or clad only in rags, its hair disheveled and matted with straw. More often than not, a stone bulged from its forehead. The stage fool and the court jester were traditionally clad in motley, caps and bells, sporting bladder and pinwheel, the carnivalesque accoutrements of folly. In humoral pathology, a victim of excess black bile (the melancholic) could be identified by swarthinness of skin, dark hair, and eyes or “black looks”—the demonizing daub of blackness.²¹ The maniac’s high color might be due to an excess of yellow bile in a choleric personality. With the possible exception of syphilis, physical appearance in madness advertised what was believed to be going on inside the body more stereotypically than did any other condition. As part of the secularization of psychology, there was a renaissance in the Greek art of physiognomy, the reading of character from facial features. Artists such as Charles Le Brun and artist/anatomists such as Sir Charles Bell made physiognomical studies of the emotions—fear, joy, rage, jealousy, anger, anguish, and so forth—that could be used as bona fide diagnostic tools by enlightened doctors wishing to distance themselves from supernatural causes. The centuries-old public spectacle of lunacy at London’s Bethlam Hospital, better known as Bedlam, the byword for chaos and confusion, was ended around 1770 when its doors were closed to paying sightseers.²² Like Tyburn, it ceased to be on the tourist itinerary. At the same time, many private and charitable lunatic asylums were established, some of which, like the Quaker-run York Retreat, employed the new enlightened moral therapy, which substituted reason, kindness, and good example for restraint, neglect, and cruelty. Not all the private establishments, of course, followed this *modus operandi*.²³

While the mad body disappeared from public view, human marvels, monstrosities, and oddities were on display at fairs and freak shows to a greater

extent than ever before as enlightened curiosity replaced the medieval Christian endorsement of wonder, with its fear of forbidden knowledge.²⁴ Conjoined (Siamese) twins, individuals bearing the remnants of a parasitic twin, limbless torsos, giants, dwarfs, wild men and bearded women, exotic erotic specimens such as Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman the Hottentot Venus, pickled malformed fetuses, and people with serious (yet undiscovered and unnamed) diseases and disabilities such as elephantiasis, neurofibromatosis, and vitiligo, were exhibited to a paying public increasingly accustomed to window shopping in the new retail consumer market.²⁵ Exploitation was undoubtedly the name of the game in many cases of exhibitionism but not in all as the new culture of body identity and personal ownership attests, and as is reinforced by Tim Hitchcock's analysis of London beggars who used their bodies in a self-conscious and deliberate way to weave a story as they waved for attention. Nevertheless, in an age that disputed ownership of a dead body, so-called sports of nature risked being acquired (and therefore denied burial) by the new and increasing breed of collector for anatomical and pathological display. The woeful tale of Charles Byrne, the Irish giant, stalked and purchased after death for the reputedly enormous sum of £500 (\$60,000 today) by the surgeon-anatomist John Hunter (1728–1793) for his London museum, is well known, but Hunter was also not averse to securing the rights of the bodies of his patients postmortem in exchange for repairing them antemortem.²⁶ Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the founder of Utilitarianism and an affirmed atheist, bequeathed his own body to posterity. He was the first person known to have volunteered to be dissected, and this took place during the passage of the Anatomy Bill (1832) through Parliament, a bill he helped draft to secure bodies for dissection by medical students. Following dissection—for the edification of surgery or physic and not for determining cause of death—Bentham's body was to be embalmed and displayed fully clothed as a so-called auto-icon, which he considered to be a cheaper and more realistic alternative to statuary. Bentham commended others to do likewise.²⁷ His skeleton, supporting a waxwork effigy (the embalming attempt failed), is displayed in a glass-fronted wooden cabinet in the South Cloisters of University College London, the enlightened nonconformist university that he helped to found in 1826. As Andrew Cunningham has pointed out, it is "the body of the complete exhibitionist."²⁸ It probably comes as no surprise that Bentham's auto-icon is unique because nobody before or since has taken up the challenge to be three-dimensionalized in this way. Indeed, its crudity would undoubtedly have offended many who aspired to the new enlightened modes of gentility, which raised the threshold of shame and prized politeness and the closed body that went with it.

There had been close links between the early modern body and the environment. Pain and disease were held to be mobile entities that could be brought to the body's surface by bleeding, cupping, purging, and vomiting. Evacuations

would be viewed and discussed by family and friends as well as the attending practitioner. Eventually, all of the body's products, except tears, became unmentionable in decent society, and the new emphasis on propriety in turn prefigured and pointed in the direction of the stricter codes of bodily control associated with evangelicalism and Victorianism.²⁹

As always, however, there are cultural dichotomies, and the eighteenth century witnessed the birth of the body's subversive potential, irresistible to a rebellious media with scant regard for doctors, be they learned or otherwise. Bodies and body language featured extensively in political cartoons and caricatures after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 put an end to censorship and facilitated the rise of the Grub Street press.³⁰ Artists and engravers such as Thomas Rowlandson, James Gillray, and George Cruikshank vied with each other to produce the most salacious and scatological visual punning. Society doctors representing politicians purged, anatomized, amputated, condemned, and certified opponents, royalty, and even entire countries. Asses and enemas, phalluses and farts, breasts and bloodletting, and bowels and butchery were used to maximum effect in the double entendre. The body politic could be reduced to a repulsive victim of overzealous doctoring or it could, alternatively, become transformed into a grotesque mob-monster, devouring everything in its path. The resultant imagery was generally both lewd and ludicrous. In addition, new lifestyle magazines such as the *Spectator* (founded in 1711) aimed to rewrite the eighteenth-century body, using a mix of satire, silliness, and reflective prose. The body was a trope for all the usual social mishmash of the day, but at the same time, the *Spectator*, as Roy Porter has shown in his own posthumously published work, was an early champion of Locke's idea that consciousness, not substance, was the location of the person, and that man did not seem born to enjoy life but merely to deliver it down to others.³¹

The fusion of fine art and anatomy was also formalized during the Enlightenment. London's Royal Academy of Arts, founded in 1768, appointed a professor of anatomy, William Hunter (1718–83), the older and more socially adept brother of John, to instruct the students of its life classes. Hunter's job was to demonstrate both surface anatomy (on living models) and dissected anatomy. Flayed (skinned) bodies, for example, revealed musculature and tendon attachment to joints, while deeper dissection explored the relationship between the organs and the underlying skeleton. As explored by Ruth Richardson, Hunter's own great oeuvre, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774), exemplifies the synthesis of master dissector and anatomical illustrator, in this case the Dutch artist, Jan Van Rymdyk. Needless to say, corpses obtained for artistic instruction and for medical books were invariably commissioned from grave robbers. At precisely the same period, a shift was taking place from the concept of holistic disease, with its roots in humoral pathology, to disease localization, based on postmortem findings associated with signs