

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE HUMAN BODY IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT

EDITED BY CAROLE REEVES



A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF THE HUMAN BODY

IN THE AGE OF
ENLIGHTENMENT

Edited by Carol R



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A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF THE HUMAN BODY

VOLUME 4

A Cultural History of the Human Body

General Editors: Linda Kalof and William Bynum

Volume 1

A Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity

Edited by Daniel H. Garrison

Volume 2

A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age

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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

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
SERIES PREFACE	xiii
Introduction: Enlightenment Bodies <i>Carole Reeves</i>	1
1 The Body in Birth and Death <i>Lisa Forman Cody</i>	13
2 Pliable Bodies: The Moral Biology of Health and Disease <i>Kevin Siena</i>	33
3 Sexual Knowledge: Panspermist Jokes, Reproductive Technologies, and Virgin Births <i>George Rousseau</i>	53
4 Medical Knowledge: The Adventures of Mr. Machine, with Morals <i>Jessica Riskin</i>	73
5 Popular Beliefs about the Dead Body <i>Ruth Richardson</i>	93
6 The Body Beautiful <i>David M. Turner</i>	113
7 Marked Bodies and Social Meanings <i>Laura Gowing</i>	133

8	The Puzzle of the Pox-Marked Body <i>Susan Staves</i>	155
9	Cultural Representations: Rogue Literature and the Reality of the Begging Body <i>Tim Hitchcock</i>	175
10	Self and Society: Attitudes toward Incest in Popular Ballads <i>Ruth Perry</i>	193
	NOTES	213
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	255
	CONTRIBUTORS	283
	INDEX	287

ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER 1

Figure 1.1: Sairey Gamp and Betsy Prig prepare Anthony Chuzzlewit's corpse.	14
Figure 1.2: Fetal rotation.	23
Figure 1.3: Preformed human in spermatozoon.	25
Figure 1.4: "Monsters" produced through maternal imagination.	26
Figure 1.5: Hanged bodies suspended from a gibbet while others are mutilated.	27

CHAPTER 2

Figure 2.1: "Sensibility."	36
Figure 2.2: Health warnings to drunkards.	42
Figure 2.3: Daniel Massiah suffering from the glandular disease of Barbados (elephantiasis).	43
Figure 2.4: The poor, depicted as constitutionally and physically weak with "uncouth features."	47
Figure 2.5: Rowdy overcrowded poverty.	50
Figure 2.6: Robust native inhabitants of the American Antilles.	52

CHAPTER 3

Figure 3.1: Pregnancy at about the fourth month when the mother first feels the baby's movements (quickening).	57
Figure 3.2: Rural scene from the <i>Georgics</i> .	61
Figure 3.3: Chicken-breeding ovens.	62
Figure 3.4: Hermaphrodite genitalia.	64
Figure 3.5: Birth of the Virgin Mary.	67

CHAPTER 4

Figure 4.1: Mechanical toy in which a water wheel drives the music cylinder, which animates a bird puppet.	75
Figure 4.2: "Moll Handy."	76
Figure 4.3: Julien Offray de La Mettrie.	78
Figure 4.4: The heart is depicted as a pumping machine, but the male figure nevertheless portrays the organ as the seat of human emotion.	83
Figure 4.5: Orangutan, long considered to bear a disturbingly close resemblance to man.	85

CHAPTER 5

Figure 5.1: Moll Hackabout in her coffin, surrounded by mourners.	97
Figure 5.2: Dissection of the body of Tom Nero.	100
Figure 5.3: Grave robbers placing a disinterred, shrouded body into a sack.	102
Figure 5.4: Full-term fetus in birth position.	104
Figure 5.5: Flayed and roped corpse showing musculature.	105

CHAPTER 6

Figure 6.1: Personification of Beauty.	115
Figure 6.2: The magical mill that transforms ugly wives into beautiful and obedient ones.	117
Figure 6.3: Woman wearing curled hair pieces attached to her natural hair.	121

Figure 6.4: Good and bad posture.	121
Figure 6.5: Fashionable patches on a white face and those on a black “savage.”	129

CHAPTER 7

Figure 7.1: <i>Marriage à la Mode</i> (detail).	137
Figure 7.2: A drunken, sore-infested mother drops her baby while preoccupied with taking snuff.	138
Figure 7.3: Fishwives in the market with their tankards of ale (detail).	140
Figure 7.4: An elderly woman surrounded by the trappings of youth, attends to her toilette.	144
Figure 7.5: Female Hottentot as observed by an eighteenth-century visitor to southern Africa.	146
Figure 7.6: Moll Cutpurse (Mary Frith) as depicted in 1662.	148

CHAPTER 8

Figure 8.1: Moll Hackabout being treated for the pox.	157
Figure 8.2: Preserved head of a poxed prostitute.	158
Figure 8.3: Painful pox treatments including sweating, salivating, scarification, and cauterization.	160
Figure 8.4: Skull with the bone caries typical of tertiary syphilis.	164
Figure 8.5: Male genitals with syphilitic sores and enlarged, infected inguinal glands.	165

CHAPTER 9

Figure 9.1: Ex-soldier with no arms and a peg-leg sailor drinking in a tavern.	184
Figure 9.2: A “deserving beggar” approaches a pluralist for alms.	185
Figure 9.3: “Blind” beggar checks the contents of his collecting tin.	187
Figure 9.4: Ballad singer, with babe in arms and small girl, bawls out a song of female ruin.	189
Figure 9.5: Female beggar with baby collecting scraps from the Industrious ’Prentice wedding feast.	189

CHAPTER 10

Figure 10.1: A knight and his lover flee from death.	200
Figure 10.2: A wet-nurse receives a high-born child.	204
Figure 10.3: A brother and sister play with a baby.	211

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 swarthy 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