Chapter IV. Body Parts in Captivity

Pathologizing Women

A primary focus of the medical investigations surrounding Anne Hunter was sexual difference, especially attempts to explain female sexuality. Not only did the Hunter brothers conduct the extensive obstetrical studies documented in the *Gravid Uterus*, but Anne’s brother Everard Home sought to devise for animals a “sexual system,” such as that developed by Linnaeus for categorizing plants, using mode of generation and variation of the ovum as the bases for categories of genera and species: such a system, he claimed, would be the only “correct and general classification of all animals.”¹ In Home’s estimation, female reproduction required special attention, for it was “more difficult to develop the female organs in a perfect state than any other organs in the body, the brain excepted.”²

As described in Chapter II, the focus of the Hunter/Home circle reflected the interests of the wider medical community. Classical and Renaissance models had described male and female sexual organs in terms of perfect and less perfect variants, in that female genitalia were understood to remain “inverted” inside the body, due to a lack of sufficient heat necessary to force them out. Thomas Laqueur has shown that by the late 18th-century, this model had given way to a “two sex” system, in which both male and female sexual organs were considered uniquely and perfectly designed for their purpose.³ Any consequent suggestion of intrinsic male-female equality was

² Ibid.
nevertheless quashed by concurrent efforts towards finding other scientifically “provable” biological differences between the sexes. Science and medicine were marshaled to “demonstrate” distinct male and female purposes in life -- public life and the exercise of reason for men, emotivity and family life for women. Female sexuality justified restrictions on women’s role in society because the presence of ovaries limited female bodies, making them prisoners of hysteria, melancholy, and emotionalism (not to mention menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation). In this way, female sexuality, though no longer described in terms of “incomplete” male sexuality, nevertheless remained a pathology. The contribution of anatomy, then, was to document the differences on which gender hierarchy could be maintained; the female sex needed to be explained in order for it to be governed.  

Indeed, the study of sexuality and the study of pathology were closely related enterprises. The third painting in Hogarth’s *Marriage a-la-Mode* series, “The Inspection” (1782-83), testifies to contemporary assumptions regarding the overlap (Fig. 4.1). Hogarth’s quack doctor is visited by a married man and his mistress who complain about the inefficacy of pills they obtained on a previous visit. The doctor appears to be a teacher, a virtuoso in the 17th century sense: his closet houses a skeleton and a model for anatomical demonstration, while the far room contains a number of vessels for chemical mixtures. His collection includes a number of rare curiosities, including a huge fossilized bone, a stuffed alligator, and a giant egg. On the wall near the windows are displayed two depictions of human malformations: conjoined twins and a man whose arms grow out of the top of his head.

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Figure 4.1 William Hogarth, *Marriage a-la-Mode* (1782-83) “The Inspection”
The sexual nature of the couple’s condition is clear from the context of the *Marriage a-la-mode* series and its accompanying poem, but Hogarth leaves further clues in this scene. The quack sells tea bricks (an aphrodisiac), stacked above the closet. The mistress modestly covers a blister on her face with a handkerchief, while the husband leaves the lid to the pill bottle in the place where he is most affected -- right between his legs. On the quack’s table (beneath the jars of preparations) lies a skull filled with holes wrought by syphilis. These cues would have been clearly understood by Hogarth’s contemporaries: remedies for venereal disease were frequently advertised in magazines, and medical men promised “invisible cures” superior to conventional mercury treatments in speed and lack of side effects (for indeed these typically consisted only of water infused with herbs), available at out-of-the-way locations.⁵ The doctor’s career is devoted to both the study of sex and the study of freaks.

Although he was one of the most highly regarded medical men of his age, John Hunter shared much in common with Hogarth’s quack. He published his *Treatise on Venereal Disease* in 1786; both he and Home studied hermaphroditism at length. Special pride of place in his studies went to what Home termed “monsters,” described in four categories: preternatural situation of parts, addition of parts, deficiency of parts, and hermaphroditism. Hunter’s alliance with Captain Cook’s associate Sir Joseph Banks yielded the addition of several more items to his collection -- and indeed Hogarth’s quack’s image of conjoined twins recalls a particular skull, in Hunter’s possession via Banks, of a double-headed child from Bengal. Home lavished enormous care on --

and betrayed puerile, fetishizing fascination with -- this skull. Depicting it from varied angles, he even imagined the child alive with two strands of beads at the neck, posed in front of a cloudscape (Fig. 4.2).\textsuperscript{6} Others of the abnormalities in Hunter’s collection were animals. Some were induced (such as a cock’s spur grafted to the comb on his head); some occurred in nature. A typically enthusiastic (and scattered) letter to John’s protégé Edward Jenner reads:

I am told there is the skin of a toad in Berkeley Castle that is of prodigious size. Let me know the truth of it, its dimensions, what bones are still in it, and if it can be stolen by some invisible being\textsuperscript{.} I buried two toads last August was a twelve month. I open’d the grave last Octr and they were well and lively\textsuperscript{.} Have you any queer fish? Write to me soon.\textsuperscript{7}

The conceptual overlap of female sexuality and pathology was reflected in the physical layout of William Hunter’s medical collection. Specimens of female sex organs were housed adjacently to “deficiencies,” “redundancies” and “deformities,” on the north and east sides of his exhibition hall, respectively. The gaze directed at women’s bodies was a pathologizing gaze.

The act of healing, meanwhile, took on shades of seduction. As Roy Porter has pointed out, medical men hinted about their own prowess as seducers as well as healers, “almost as if the one stood as collateral for the other.”\textsuperscript{8} The famous, eccentric doctor James Graham promised to share his secrets to virility in his “Temple of Health and Hymen,” where audiences

\textsuperscript{6} Home, Lectures on Comparative Anatomy, 4:cxix-cxii.
\textsuperscript{8} Porter, Health for Sale, 156. Porter describes the disgracing of Mesmer in Paris similarly: “…the implicit assumption that his séances must be a threat to female honour carried great weight.” See his Health for Sale, 156. See also R. Darnton, Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).
Figure 4.2 Selected plates from Everard Home, *Lectures on Comparative Anatomy* (1814)
were treated to lectures on sexual health, and simultaneously titillated by “Goddesses of Youth and Health” and the “Singing of a Young Lady.” For fifty pounds, Graham boasted, a couple could spend a night in the “Celestial or Magnetico-electrico Bed” accompanied by (pace Nares) none other than Cupid and Psyche:

[The bed measures] 12 ft. long by 9 ft. wide, supported by forty pillars of brilliant glass of the most exquisitive workmanship, in richly variegated colours. The super-celestial dome of the bed, which contains the odoriferous, balmy and ethereal spices, odours and essences, which is the grand reservoir of those reviving invigorating influences which are exhaled by the breath of the music and by the exhilarating force of electrical fire, is covered on the other side with brilliant panes of looking-glass. On the utmost summit of the dome are placed two exquisite figures of Cupid and Psyche, with a figure of Hymen behind, with his torch flaming with electrical fire in one hand and with the other, supporting a celestial crown, sparkling over a pair of living turtle doves, on a little bed of roses. The chief principle of my Celestial Bed is produced by artificial lodestones. About 15 cwt. of compound magnets are continually pouring forth in an everflowing circle. The bed is constructed with a double frame, which moves on an axis or pivot and can be converted into an inclined plane.⁹

In general, medical men who concerned themselves with women’s reproduction -- especially the new breed of so-called “man-midwives” -- were suspected of a desire to prey sexually on the silly and the vulnerable. Even well-intentioned young medical students, when first faced with live patients instead of anatomical models, were considered likely to give in to temptation. William Hunter, on the forefront of male physicians specializing in obstetrics, was said to avoid taking advantage of his patients only by “the help of his cold constitution and dint of very long practice.”¹⁰ The pathologizing gaze held women prisoners of their biology and captive to implicit sexual subjugation.

“Despair”

The text of Haydn’s fourth canzonetta, “Despair” (Ex. 4.1), highlights the female body. A “heart” feels anguish, and a “tongue” expresses it; these physical organs stand in the stead of the first person pronoun and remove the speaker from unmediated expression and feeling. In verse 2, the protagonist compares herself to a slave, a possession owned and lacking freedom. In verses 3 and 4, she imagines herself as a buried corpse, and only here does the word “I” appear as an agent -- though not as a sentient one, for in death “I ne’er can know, I ne’er can see,” nor can she witness a mourner’s regret.

Corpses, hearts, tongues, hair, and bosoms are in fact strewn throughout the whole of Anne Hunter’s poetic output, reducing the reciting (or, in the case of the texts set to music, singing) female to a series of body parts, and suggesting a subtle commonality between the ostensibly opposed space of poet and surgeon. Just as John Hunter created a museum in which to preserve and observe corpses, organs, and limbs, the canzonettas resemble a parallel type of exhibition, where the artifacts on display are the similarly dissected bodies (living and dead) of women making music, their frequent sighs bringing their bobbing bosoms into view.

The textual structure of “Despair” centers on contrasts. Verse 1 juxtaposes secret with exposed anguish; verse 3 contrasts silence with unchecked mourning; verse 4, falling (dew drops) with rising (sigh). It is verse 2 that contains the central contrast of the poem: slavery versus freedom, or the captivity of sorrow in the past versus an escape into freedom in the future:
The anguish of my bursting heart
Till now my tongue hath ne’er betray’d
Despair at length reveals the smart
No time can cure, no hope can aid.

My Sorrows verging to the Grave,
No more shall pain thy gentle breast.
Think! Death give freedom to the Slave,
Nor mourn for me when I’m at rest.

Yet if at eve, you chance to stray
Where silent sleeps the peacefull dead,
Give to your kind compassion way,
Nor check the tears by pity shed.

When e’er the precious dew drop falls
I ne’er can know, I ne’er can see;
And if sad thought my fate recalls
A Sigh may rise, unheard by me.

Isobel Armstrong has pointed out that 18th-century female poets favored images of imprisonment, captivity, and slavery as implicit metaphors for the restrictions of the bourgeois domestic sphere. The protagonist of “Despair” is a slave to romantic disappointment in a prison of domesticity, where love is her only option. For her, death is an escape from slavery into freedom. But in the second half of the poem, the characters switch parts: the protagonist now experiences, and presumably enjoys, oblivious silence while her lover suffers, weeping. The contrasts within the text, then, reflect the balance attained by exchanged roles in the two halves of the song.

Haydn’s setting intensifies the central opposition, encapsulating in the prelude both captive anguish and freedom from pain. The first two-and-a-half bars, with their evocative accidentals, emotive passing tones, and unstable sense of meter (an implied emphasis on beat 2 of m. 1 and an fz on beat 2 of

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Example 4.1 Joseph Haydn, *Dr Haydn’s VI Original Canzonettas* [1794]

Example 4.1 (continued)

3. Yet, if at eve you chance to stray
   |: Where silent sleep the peaceful dead, |:| |
   |:| Give to your kind compassion way, |:| |
   |: Nor check the tears |: by pity shed, |: |: |: |: |

4. Where'er the precious dew drop falls
   |: I ne'er can know, I ne'er can see; |: |: |
   |:| And if sad thought my fate recalls, |:| |
   |: A sigh may rise |: unheard by me. |: |: |: |
m. 2 -- NB after a dissonance) suggest the anguish of slavery. The freely improvisational, fantasia qualities of mm. 3-6 (indicated by the variety of subdivisions and the wide range) communicate the freedom to which the protagonist plans to escape. Frequent voice exchanges (mm. 10, 16, 17, 18-19, 22, and 27) evoke the sense of overall balance brought about by the reversed roles.

And yet Haydn’s setting does not accept unproblematically the freedom that the poem’s protagonist projects for herself. The ultimate impression left by the music is not the improvisatory liberty of the second half of the prelude. Rather, the music leaves the listener with an overwhelming sense of descent, “sorrows verging to the grave” (v. 2). At m. 12 the keyboard steps tellingly outside the rest of the narrative, slipping stepwise an entire octave from B to B. Likewise the prominent recurring motive that first appears in m. 1-2: C# sinks to F#. The turn to the flat side of the key (V7/IV) already in the first bar seems to rob energy from the melody before it even gets started; in contrast, the E# in m. 3 propels that C# to initiate the improvisatory “freedom” passage. For the greater part, however, the C# motive descends throughout the piece (as in mm. 7, 9, and the last eighth-note of 23), as do its transpositions to D-natural (m. 15, after the sinking tonicization of C), F# (m. 24, left hand), A (m. 24, alto), B (m. 28, alto), or inversion (F# descending to C#, m. 28 left hand). The C# motives at mm. 18, 19, and 20 (marked with fz’s, probably the phrase of greatest tension in the piece) all descend, but propelled not only by accents but also by E#s and supporting 9th chords, they ultimately give way to the song’s only other successful flight of freedom, m. 23. A final improvisatory ascent is hinted at in m. 28, but is aborted in favor of a series of descending first-inversion chords.
The brief recollection descends to E (marked with a stroke as was the apex E in m. 23). Finally, as a concluding gesture, the soprano countermelody C#-B-A, which followed the C# motive in m. 23 and its transposition to A in the next bar, starts in m. 30 on D and descends D-C#-B, then continues further down, through A# to A-natural. The final two bars recall the descending C#-motive but ultimately sink to the tonic. The entire canzonet is subject to the downward tug defined in the first bars as slavery.

Anne Hunter’s poem envisioned a possibility of freedom. That the ascending freedom theme is overwhelmed by inexorable descent suggests that in the musical setting, the protagonist is not allowed a death that provides escape. Instead, in “Despair,” death remains a state of captivity. Haydn’s setting thus allies itself with the more general Enlightenment obsession over women’s nature. Anatomized into an object, the singing female is painted in unstable tones and ultimately trapped within the domestic sphere of feeling and sensibility, unable to escape the clinical gaze.