# Early Modern Women's Concept of Woman: the Weak Body and the Heroic Inner Self

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"Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 41). Hamlet's words to his mother encapsulate the dominant and enduring belief regarding the condition of womankind, shared by men and women likewise: women are frail or "the weaker vessel", according to Saint Peter (The First Epistle of Peter 3:7). Moreover, their weak bodies shelter their weak characters serving as the visible confirmation of the inner-self reality of every woman since Eve. This alleged weakness, or frailty, inherited from mothers to daughters, was perceived in the Early Modern context as inescapable, the result of God's punishment upon Eve for her responsibility in the original sin that ultimately led humankind to fall: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:16).

God's sentence upon Eve was, therefore, also physical: sorrow, pain, desire. Eve's body would carry the sign of God's wrath, and she would pass on that sign to the following generations, as Tertullian acknowledged: "And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too" (4).

Eve, along with all Eve's daughters throughout the ages, would also experience another of God's original punishments: they would live under men's rule — fathers, brothers, husbands — and consequently they should

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[1] This paper was presented at the international conference "Corps Héroïque, corps de chair dans le récits de vie de la première modernité" / "Heroic Bodies, Bodies of Flesh: Representing the Body in Early Modern Life Narratives", in the University of Rheims Champagne-Ardenne, France, June 2012.

maintain a submissive role in society.[2] Women should, therefore, be obedient and silent, as those were the requirements established both by the Greek philosophy and the Jewish-Christian Bible, and postulated by the exegesis of the Fathers of the Church and Scholasticism.

Notwithstanding the epistemological changes that took place in the Early Modern age, dialogues of continuity with former accepted ideologies were perceived, including Galen's theory of humours, which also emphasised women's physical and psychological weakness. Since the theory of bodily humours explained mental and psychological traits, women's specific physical characteristics — like menstruation and womb diseases, fat hips and narrow shoulders — were justified by this sex connection to colder and moister humours. The theory of bodily humours further elucidated women's psychological and mental characteristics, like their propensity to lunacy, as Ian Maclean observed in his analysis on the notion of Early Modern women (28-46).

Early Modern men and women were, therefore, the holders of solid ideologies prescribed by the various fields of knowledge, which asserted an identical frame of thought regarding the concept of women. In this context of continuity, however, our attention is drawn to the emergence of two important contributions that would alter the established condition of women. Both the Humanist movement and the emphasis on the private reading of the Bible underlined by the Reformation enabled women to become increasingly more educated — in fact a small minority who belonged to the aristocracy. Thus, women progressively held important roles as patronesses of the Arts, and they would eventually become writers, as well. Focusing on women's literary production, especially with reference to diaries and autobiographical writings, how did women perspective themselves, physically and psychologically? Bringing 'embodiment' into question, when, how and where does the body become visible in women's narratives? I would like to argue that the references to the physical and socio-political body in English Early Modern women's autobiographical

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[2] As Saint Paul emphasised: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjugation. For Adam was first formed, than Eve. And Adam was not deceived but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (First Epistle to Timothy 2: 11-14).

writings echo the discourses that labelled women as weak and frail.

When approaching an autobiographical writing, one bears in mind a wide set of theories which deal with the "subject" of the narrative: Louis Althusser argued that the 'subject' is a subject of ideology (127-188); Carl Jung developed the concept of the "collective unconscious", defending that racial memory is based on mythic or archetypal models (42-53); Michel Foucault observed that there is no "outside" to power (141); Pierre Lejeune acknowledged that "autobiography is individual and subjective and claims to speak the truth" ("A Plea for a Guide in Autobiographical Europe"). The list could go on but the key point is that the subject of the autobiographical writings — in the present case, women in Early Modern England — tells her life story according to the cultural, ideological, political and religious dynamics available to her in a specific moment in History, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson noticed in their work.[3] Therefore, it is no wonder that the references to the body are so rare or none at all, just as Smith and Watson have acknowledged:

> Respectable women up through the nineteenth century could not, and would not, tell explicitly… stories about their bodies because the cultural meanings assigned to these bodies had to do with myths of the corrupt nature of female sexuality (51).

It is also my purpose to argue that weak bodies accommodate, quite frequently, heroic inner-selves, as a combination of two antagonistic selves, negotiated as the female author engages in her autobiographical narrative. In this regard, Anne Clifford's and Margaret Cavendish's autobiographical texts offer two stimulating and representative examples for analysis.

Lady Anne Clifford's diaries consist of the records in day-by-day books dating from 1603 to 1676, although this paper focuses exclusively on "The Knole Diary", which covers the period from 1603 to 1619.[4]

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[3] *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives: Reading Autobiography.*

[4] Victoria Sackville-West published *The Diary of the Lady Anne Clifford*, with an introductory note in 1923. There is a more recent edition of Lady Anne's diaries by a member of the Clifford's family, David J. H. Clifford, entitled *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford*, published in 1990 by Sutton Publishing and with later re-editions

In this series of notes, the reader becomes familiar with Anne's life 'quest'. Being a woman, Anne saw the family properties pass to her uncle on her father's death, when she was aged 15. However, it was Anne's belief that she was the rightful heir to the family's estates, regardless of her father's will, her husbands' beliefs, the king's pressures, and numerous lawyers' and churchmen's arguments. Anne would spend forty-one years fighting against the "combined patriarchal forces" (the expression is used by the editors of *Her own life*, 35) never renouncing her rights, until the day she finally won her family's estates back; Anne was then 56 years old. Bringing into consideration the excerpts of her diary of 1616 and 1617, she frequently uses the phrase "the business", as a reference to this legal fight, and although remarkably silent in what concerns her female body, bodily issues and psychological considerations, she mentions how this 'business', or 'matters' affected her life. Anne's first husband, Richard Sackville, Earl of Dorset, pressured Anne vehemently, so that she would accept a cash settlement in return for her renouncement over the family properties. The pressure was both psychological and physical, as confirmed in numerous records: on the 11th April 1616, Anne observes "I came from London to Knole, where I had but a '*cold*' welcome from my lord" (40); on the 2nd May, Anne refers to the message sent from her husband threatening her that it would be 'the last time she would ever see him again', followed by an entry a week later, stating that her husband had decided to 'take their 2-year-old daughter away from Anne' (41); on the 13th May, Anne writes about her husband's message: "to persuade me to yield to my lord's desire in this business at this time, or else I was undone forever" (42); on the 23rd April 1617, Anne comments: "this night my lord should have lain with me, but he and I fell out about matters" (48). These are but a few of the numerous accounts regarding the psychological unkindness Anne suffered

(1992, 2003). Lady Anne's diaries are not original manuscripts, but fragmented 18th century- transcripts, scattered at different locations. "The Knole Diary" is held at the Kent Country Archives, in Maidstone. All references in this paper to Anne Clifford's "The Knole Diary" will be made from the sourcebook *Her Own Life: Autobiographical writings by seventeenth-century Englishwomen*, eds. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby and Helen Wilcox.

throughout her married life, which also extended to the conjugal bed, since her husband would not seek Anne's body on account of their "falling outs" over 'the business'.[5] As a result of this much troubled period in Anne's life, she wrote one single direct comment about her inner-self: "So as I may truly say, I am like an owl in the desert" (42). Using the biblical metaphor described in the Book of Psalms[6], she presents a unique 'audible' clamour in her narrative, a "cry" from an afflicted inner-self, who suffers most of her life in silence. From the outside, concerning Anne's physical identity — or rather, the body which accommodates her inner-self — her strength is only perceived by the registers about her choices of clothing. On several occasions and despite the "falling outs" and "ill offices" towards her, she decides to wear her "white satin gown" and her "white waistcoat", or the "green flannel gown" and the "taffety waistcoat" (46, 48). Anne's heroic inner-self would be perceptible through her dress and adornment choices, regardless of her weak body and fragile family condition.

Yet, Anne Clifford's body becomes more openly visible in her other sort of "autobiographical text" — according to Hilary Hinds and Helen Wilcox (35) — the *Great Picture* — a triptych she commissioned the Dutch artist Jan van Belcamp, in 1646. [7] The first painting shows Anne Clifford, aged 15, the pivotal year of her life when the legal fight over her family properties began and it portrays a young aristocratic woman, dressed in rich clothing and embellished with fine-looking adornments. Apart from the central figure, significant secondary elements emerge from the painting: the books[8] and the musical instruments that draw one's attention to Anne's education and stress her role as a dedicated patroness and writer.

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[5] It is also important to note that this pressure reached the highest ranks conceivable, since Anne records, in the entries of January 1617, how the king himself used "foul means" to persuade her into accepting the settlement (45).

[6] Psalms 102:6.

[7] The triptych *The Great Picture* is now at the Abbot Hall Art Gallery, in Cumbria. <http://www.abbothall.org.uk/great-picture>. Appendix 1.

[8] Including titles by Ovid, Chaucer, Cervantes, Spenser, among others.

The central painting depicts Anne's closer relatives: her parents and her two brothers.[9] It is noteworthy that the portraits on the back wall represent Anne's aunts, not uncles — family women, not the men with whom she struggled so much throughout her life. Although Anne is not portrayed in this panel, her mother's finger pointing to her womb may indicate Anne's presence *in utero*, as Heidi Brayman Hackel noticed (225), whereas the hand pointing to the two boys probably suggests that, in spite of the Clifford two male heirs, it would eventually be a woman to become the family legal heiress. Thus, although Anne's body is not depicted in the central panel, her physical absence is, in fact, filled by her concealed presence.

The right side panel depicts Ann, aged 56, precisely when she won her legal fight over her estates. Once again, Anne appears surrounded by books. The pattern of portraits hanging on the back wall is maintained, this time representing her two husbands.[10] Anne complied with the patriarchal conventions, since her husbands were depicted on her pictorial autobiography, although they merely assumed a secondary part.

This "biographical" triptych is highly representative, since it embodies Anne's most important life expedition and final accomplishment. Anne Clifford's life narratives exemplify the submission of women to the patriarchal conventions, although they ultimately confirm how heroic the inner-self can be, despite being sheltered in a "weak vessel". Anne's body becomes evident in her written narrative when she mentions how her husband's pressure was also physical and when her body is dressed in fashionable and bright colours, so that her confidence and strength would be perceived from the outside. The fact that Anne decided to complement her written life narrative with a pictorial text is also very meaningful: her body became visible. She associated her body representation with her sophisticated upbringing and notorious education, assuming an observable

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[9] Anne's parents were Margaret Russel and George Clifford, Earl of Cumberland; her brothers were Francis and Robert, who died in their childhood. For Anne Clifford's biography, see George Williamson (1922).

[10] Richard Sackville, Earl of Dorset, who died in 1624 and Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, whom she married in 1630.

presence in two of the three panels and maintaining a concealed appearance in the central painting. In the end, Anne's body holds a significant message: her body ages in the paintings, emphasising not only the inescapable course of time, but also how the heroic inner-self was permanent in spite of the impermanence of time.

Margaret Cavendish's *A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life*[11] — abbreviating the 12-lines title — was first published in 1656 as part of the *Nature's Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*.[12] Two significant factors must be considered when analysing the visibility of the body in Cavendish's autobiographical writings. First, her singularity, as the editors of *Her Own Life* observed:

> It comes as no surprise that Cavendish, 'singular' though she was in personality and written style, found it impossible to create an image of herself without reference to those masculine forces which, by contradiction, defined her (89).

Physically, and bearing in mind the Derridean notion of *différance*, one is a woman in opposition to being a man. However, in terms of gender, in Early Modern times one was a woman within the ideological frame of patriarchal forces that defined women as frail and weak, regardless of their singularity, creativity, social and cultural achievements. Moreover, if a biographical act should be analysed according to its moment in time and in place, then another significant factor emerges from Cavendish's life narrative. In fact, Cavendish's autobiographical text was written when she was living in exile, in Antwerp (Anna Battigelli 1-10).[13] As Smith and Watson admitted, "the site of narration is also a moment in history, a sociopolitical space" which contributes to the 'self-definition', 'self-recon-

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[11] All references to Margaret Cavendish's diary will be made from the sourcebook *Her Own Life*.

[12] The author specifically mentioned in the title: "And a true story at the latter end, wherein there is no feignings." Therefore, right from the beginning and inscribed in the very title, Margaret Cavendish claimed to have recorded the truth about her life story. A copy of this work is held in the British Library.

[13] The political context of the Interregnum led many royalists to foreign lands, as happened to the Cavendish couple, who lived in Paris, Rotterdam, and Antwerp.

struction' and 'self-determination' of the narrator (69, 70). Consequently, Cavendish's autobiographical narrative was written during a period of her life when the 'historical I' — the person producing the text[14] — was subject to political, economic and societal forces that certainly shaped the 'I' in the narrative. One may conclude that Cavendish was, therefore, subject to two different discourses of power which certainly influenced her autobiographical writing: the one regarding gender and patriarchal ideologies, and the one concerning the political and economic circumstances that forced her out of her comfort zone — her country.

In contrast to Anne Clifford, Margaret Cavendish writes extensively about her inner-self: "As for my humour, I was from childhood given to contemplation, being more taken or delighted with thoughts than in conversation with a society" (95). Later, she affirms: "As for my disposition, it is more inclining to be melancholy than merry, but not crabbed or peevishly melancholy, but soft, melting, solitary and contemplating melancholy" (96).

Cavendish further discloses her inner-self to her addressees, giving embodiment to interiority with phrases such as "lazy nature"; "chaste, both in nature and education"; "seldom angry"; "a great emulator"; "proud";" bashful"; "naturally a coward, in other cases very valiant" (94, 97, 98).

Particular elements on the subject of the (physical) body emerge in her autobiographical narrative, specifically when she mentions her singularity in matters of "dressing and fashions, especially such fashions as I did invent myself" (96). She further tells her readers about her diet, her fasting and her little exercise, the latter being justified so that the motions of her mind are not hindered by the motions of the body (94, 95). That Cavendish elevates the mind over the body is additionally enhanced when she observes: "and it were an injustice to prefer a fainter affection, or to esteem the body more than the mind" (97). All in all, Cavendish's autobiographical narrative is, as Bowerbank and Mendelson recognised, "a candid paper-body reproduction of the vulnerabilities of Cavendish's own physical and

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[14] Smith and Watson elaborate on the concept of 'I' or 'I's in the context of autobiographical productions. The authors differentiate the "real" or historical 'I', the narrating 'I', the narrated 'I' and the ideological 'I' (71-88).

psychological body" (12). Yet, writing about her physical and psychological vulnerabilities and qualities was most certainly Cavendish's self-analysis mechanism to achieve a self-definition understanding. Suggestively, she states that if any of her readers "scornfully" asks why she has written about her humor or disposition, the answer would be that the purpose of this disclosure was to the "authoress", not to the readers, revealing Cavendish intended a self-analysis which would eventually lead to a self-definition, a self-understanding through writing (98, 99).

Within the context of autobiographical writings, Early Modern English women writers may then have been the object of different ideologies of power: the religious, cultural, social and familial discourses which substantiated the scholastic and medieval traditions and postulated women's submission. Nevertheless, as the 'subject' of their life narratives, women negotiated those ideologies that framed them and labeled them as weak and frail. Thus, they refused to engage in a 'minoratised discourse' and their "weak" bodies became visible in multiple and varied occasions, emphasising their heroic inner-selves.

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## Appendix

Jan van Belcamp. c. 1646. *The Great Picture*. Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Cumbria. Reproduced by permission of Abbot Hall Art Gallery.

## Abstract

"Frailty, thy name is woman!" (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* I. ii. 146). Hamlet's words to his mother encapsulate the dominant and enduring belief regarding the condition of womankind, shared by men and women likewise: women are frail or "the weaker vessel". Moreover, their weak bodies shelter their weak characters serving as the visible confirmation of the inner-self reality of every woman since Eve. This alleged weakness, or frailty, inherited from mothers to daughters, was perceived in the Early Modern context as inescapable, the result of God's punishment upon Eve for her responsibility in the original sin that ultimately led humankind to fall.

Focusing on women's literary production, especially with reference to diaries and autobiographical writings, how did Early Modern women perspective themselves, physically and psychologically? Bringing 'embodiment' into question, when, how and where does the body become visible in women's narratives? I would like to argue that the references to the physical and socio-political body in English Early Modern women's autobiographical writings echo the discourses that labelled women as weak and frail. It is also my purpose to argue that weak bodies accommodate, quite frequently, heroic inner-selves. In this regard, Anne Clifford's and Margaret Cavendish's autobiographical texts offer two stimulating and representative examples for analysis.



### Keywords

Early Modern England; women; autobiography; body; inner-self.



## Résumé

"Frailty, thy name is woman!" (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* I. ii.). Les paroles de Hamlet à sa mère condensent la croyance dominante et constante concernant la condition de la femme, partagée par les hommes et les femmes de la même façon: les femmes sont fragiles ou « le sexe faible ». De plus, leurs faibles corps protègent leurs faibles caractères serviles aussi confirmant la réalité de l'être

intérieur de toutes les femmes depuis Ève. Ces présupposées faiblesses ou fragilité, transmises de mère en fille, ont été perçues dans le contexte du début de la Première Modernité comme qu'inéluctables, comme résultat du châtiment de Dieu envers Ève par sa responsabilité du pêché original, qui en fin de compte entraîna l'humanité vers la chute.

Lorsque l'on se centre sur la production littéraire féminine, surtout en ayant pour référence les journaux intimes et écrits autobiographiques, on s'interroge sur la façon dont les femmes au début de la Première Modernité se voyaient elles--mêmes, physiquement et psychologiquement. Je soutiendrais que les références au corps physique et socio-politique dans les écrits autobiographiques des femmes du début de la Première Modernité Anglais reflètent les discours qui ont étiquetés les femmes en tant que faibles et fragiles. Mon but est aussi de prouver que des corps faibles accueillent, bien souvent, des êtres intérieurs héroïques. À cet égard, les textes autobiographiques d'Anne Clifford et Margaret Cavendish nous fournissent deux exemples stimulants et représentatifs à analyser.

Mots-clés

Angleterre des débuts de la Première Modernité; femmes; autobiographie; corps; être intérieur.