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“Rags of Mortality”: Negotiating the Body in the Bluestocking Letters

JANE MAGRATH

Elizabeth Carter’s poem “A Dialogue” (1741) records a spirited discussion between Body and Mind. Each has complaints: Body complains that Mind is so preoccupied that she pursues her mental pleasures with little regard for the needs of Body; Mind counters that her pursuits are often curtailed by the inconsiderate demands of Body. Although the poem gives voice to both sides of this difficult relationship, Carter’s sympathies lie with Mind, whose crimes seem to be, if not necessarily less grievous in consequence, at least less vindictive and intentional. Body suffers from neglect, Mind from forcible control. And Mind will win, in the end, when Body will be condemned to decay, allowing Mind to “snap . . . off [her] chains and fly freely away.”¹ Within this poem, the body is represented as a kind of “other”: distinguishable from, yet tied to, a self that is closely identified with the mind. Body is a demanding presence, concerned with material necessities such as food and sleep. Mind, a more ethereal presence, abandons Body to converse with “good friends in the stars” and finds herself “cramped and confined like a slave in a chain” by the corporeal mass that imprisons her.²

“A Dialogue” is firmly situated in a post-Cartesian world with a long tradition of philosophical thought that separates body from mind and pits the two entities against each other. Conventionally, mind has been the privileged term of this dualism, and body has been constructed as what must be transcended, disavowed, rejected. Carter’s poem participates in this lengthy tradition by invoking the fantasy of transcendence. However, the poem offers a daring and radical challenge. Conventionally, this mind-body dualism is gendered: mind is masculine and body is feminine. “Woman” was typically relegated to the body and represented in opposition to the purely masculine province of mind; or bound to a

1. Elizabeth Carter, “A Dialogue,” in Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford, 1990), 168.
2. On the gender implications of Carter’s poem, see Lisa A. Freeman, “‘A Dialogue’: Elizabeth Carter’s Passion for the Female Mind,” in Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, eds., *Women’s Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730–1820* (London, 1999), 50–63.

body that is less perfect because more frail, more unreliable than that of man.³ One of the effects of this gendered dualism is that a life of the mind has been conventionally denied to women. For example, although the eighteenth century witnessed a growing interest in and debate about the education of women, assumptions of women's "natural" mental inferiority and "natural" maternal function persisted in contemporary discourses. Thus learned women were usually regarded with suspicion and often represented as cultural oddities.⁴ In "A Dialogue," though, Carter reverses the familiar pattern of gender. In the domestic dispute in the poem, Mind is female while Body is likened to a petulant husband. Her poem explicitly challenges convention, asserting that women, too, can develop their intellectual capacities, can participate in the fantasy of corporeal transcendence.

The legacy of first generation Bluestockings Elizabeth Carter and Elizabeth Montagu demonstrates the practical application of Carter's poetic assertion. These women challenged contemporary attitudes and strictures to pursue scholarship.⁵ The voluminous epistolary correspondence between Carter and Catherine Talbot, and Carter and Montagu, includes not only gossip and discussions of travel and politics but also numerous "conversations" about the scholarly work that absorbed them. Carter's translation of *Epictetus* (1758) began in response to

3. There are several texts that provide particularly useful and succinct summaries of the history—from Plato, through Augustine, to Descartes—of this well-known Western dualism and its implications. See, for example: Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (London, 1984); Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992); and Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Calif. 1993). See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), esp. for the implications of Western dualism for women. See also Theodore M. Brown, "Descartes, Dualism, and Psychosomatic Medicine," in W. F. Bynum, Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd, eds., *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, 2 vols. (London, 1985), 1:40–62, for a discussion of the influence of Descartes on medicine.
4. Eighteenth-century debates about women's education faced assumptions that women had "shallow minds incapable of 'intense and continued application' or of a 'close and comprehensive reasoning'"; Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London, 1984), 44. Bluestockings Hester Chapone (*Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, addressed to a Young Lady* [1773]) and Catharine Macaulay Graham (*Letters on Education* [1790]) engaged explicitly with these debates in extensive treatises on education. Chapone's took a conservative, conduct book–like approach, urging that education should prepare girls for their roles as wives and mothers. Macaulay's treatise, however, is an anomalous, radical piece advocating a redefinition of gender expectations.
5. Kathryn Sutherland remarks on events that perhaps contributed to the intellectual passion of Elizabeth Montagu: Elizabeth Drake (Montagu's mother) may have been educated by the famous Bathsea Makin, author of *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673); and Elizabeth Elstob, an Anglo-Saxon scholar, was employed as a governess in the home of the duchess of Portland, a friend of Montagu's from her adolescence; Sutherland, "Writings on Education and Conduct: Arguments for Female Improvement," in Vivien Jones, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700–1800* (Cambridge, 2000), 25–45 at 30.

a request from Talbot, who then encouraged her and discussed the project with her at length by post. Similarly, while writing her *Essay On The Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1769), Montagu argued and conferred with Carter by letter. The letters between these women create both friendship and intellectual community, recording the process of claiming the conventionally masculine province of mind; and thus, like Carter's poem, challenge the conventional gendering of the mind-body dualism. The correspondence, though, is more radical and more nuanced than the poem. Even as they claim a life of the mind for women, these letters explore and often validate the role of the body, undermining the very premise of the dualism and suggesting a more complex, even mysterious, partnership. "You bid me tell you," Carter writes to Elizabeth Vesey, "what neither I, nor any other mortal can tell. The manner in which soul and body is affected by each other is one of those impenetrable secrets with which, because it is impenetrable, we have no concern."⁶ And, later, she explains to Montagu, "the effect of the union between body and spirit, must ever be unaccountable to all human researches. Perhaps they are different in every individual."⁷ These excerpts stress the close relationship of body and mind, as does the correspondence as a whole, recording a struggle not so much to overcome the body as to balance embodiment with intellectual life.

Because both women suffered from chronic physical ailments (Montagu from digestive disorders and Carter migraine-like headaches), their bodies could not easily be ignored in daily life. Neither are they transcended in the epistolary representations of the life of the mind. Carter, for example, responds to Montagu, "You kindly bid me mention my health, which is, thank God, very well, except head-achs, rheumatisms, and sometimes little fevers, all which I consider as so many non-naturals, which there is no living without" (1:91, 5 September 1760). And the letters themselves illustrate not only the difficulties but also the rewards of *living with*. Carter's poem may suggest corporeal transcendence, but these epistolary selves are not represented as disembodied. Rather, they are complexly and intricately "embodied." My essay engages with this complexity to explore the rich mind-body dynamic in the correspondence. I begin by demonstrating that these bodies are, not surprisingly, often represented as is Body in Carter's poem—as irritating and constraining obstacles to intellectual pursuits. However, I suggest that the correspondence undermines this conventional dualism by evoking

6. *A Series of Letters between Mrs. Elizabeth Carter and Miss Catherine Talbot, from the year 1741 to 1770, To Which Are Added, Letters from Mrs. Elizabeth Carter to Mrs. Vesey, between the years 1763 and 1787*, ed. Montagu Pennington, 4 vols. (London, 1809), 4:101, 25 January 1774; cited henceforward in the text.
7. *Letters from Elizabeth Carter to Mrs. Montagu, between the years 1755 and 1800*, ed. Montagu Pennington, 3 vols. (1817; New York, 1973), 3:87–88, 19 September 1778.

a more fluid and nuanced relationship, both literal and metaphoric, between body and mind. At times, the presence of the body becomes a cooperative grounding force—a form of conscience—working with, not against, the mind. This cooperation becomes more intense during discussions about what were, for these women, morally problematic experiences of depression, where the suffering body becomes the guarantor of moral absolution. While it grounds and absolves, the body sometimes functions as a kind of co-conspirator, a willing scapegoat, that provides a certain degree of agency. The interconnection of body and mind is also vividly articulated when the body appears in these letters as a powerful metaphoric presence. Throughout the *Bluestocking* correspondence, I suggest, the body is represented literally as essential to the development of the mind/self and metaphorically as the medium that connects these women to one another.

THE BODY AS ANTAGONIST

The letters exchanged between Carter and Montagu and with their other friends demonstrate particular interest in corporeal matters, especially physical health. Most of the letters between Carter and Montagu contain a report of the health of the sender and a query about that of the recipient. Often, they also include a plea not to sacrifice health to the indulgence of writing a letter. In 1765, for example, Carter begs Montagu, “Pray never write to me when there is the least danger of its hurting your health” (1:282, 14 October 1765). In making this request, Carter has apparently forgotten her vexation of five years earlier when she admonished Montagu:

Surely, my dear Mrs. Montagu, it is quite an age since I heard from you, and my patience will hold out no longer. I find there is no end to wearying myself with conjectures whether this silence is occasioned by your not having recovered the sight of your eyes, or by your having lost the feeling of your heart. . . . You may urge, in excuse of giving me this solicitude, that I desired you not to write till you could do it with perfect ease. Very true: but then you might, at least, have sent me your kind love and service by the carrier, or the waggon, or any such other conveyance, as folks who cannot write written hand, make use of, to tell their friends that they are in good health, hoping they are the same. . . . I am sometimes in a fright about you, and sometimes in a tiff, but in either disposition, Your most affectionate, &c. (1:74–75, 2 February 1760)

Although it seems here that Carter would rather envision her friend ill than cooling in her affections, delayed correspondence often did signal illness and thus caused great concern to the waiting party. Carter writes to Talbot, "You cannot tell, dear Miss Talbot, how rejoiced I am to hear the good news of your recovery, unless you know how very sure I was you had been sick; for your long silence had made me certain of it" (1:273, 13 July 1748).⁸

The focus on health marks these correspondents as typical eighteenth-century letter writers. Dorothy and Roy Porter state that in this "golden age of diaries and letter-writing . . . health is prominent in both."⁹ And this epistolary convention attests to the nature of the material experience of the body in the eighteenth century, which was, so often, the experience of illness. In his historical survey of illness and death over the last four hundred years, James Riley reports that much of the European population suffered a wide variety of diseases over the course of their lives, and many suffered repeated bouts of the same illness: "To live in Europe between 1600 and 1870 was to face a series of vivid and recurrent disease risks."¹⁰ Childhood mortality was particularly high, as was maternal mortality—sometimes from difficult delivery but more often from post-delivery infection. Dorothy and Roy Porter claim that "being a fertile married woman in a pre-contraceptive age, when most married couples did not practise what Malthus called 'moral restraint,' was perhaps the highest-risk occupation of all."¹¹ If a woman survived both childhood and childbearing, her life expectancy

8. In relationships where circumstances and geographical distance typically meant that visits were limited and far between, and friendships were maintained, to a great extent, through the post, the letter was often the only guarantee of the health, even the continued existence, of the other party. When Catherine Talbot was dying, for example, she was unable to write to Carter herself. Although others kept Carter informed of Talbot's situation, it was the absence of letters in Talbot's hand that signaled the seriousness of her condition; see *Letters between Carter and Talbot*, 24 October 1769, 26 October 1769, 28 October 1769; 3:196–200. Talbot died in January 1770. And a few years earlier, Carter had written to Montagu about the silence of another friend: "I have for some time feared, from Madame de Blum's very long silence, that there was some melancholy alteration in her health. I had only waited till my return to Deal for a convenient opportunity of making some enquiry after her, but all enquiry is now unnecessary, for I yesterday received an account of her death from Monsieur de Blum, *le fils*" (1:299, 31 May 1766).
9. Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, *In Sickness and in Health: The British Experience, 1650–1850* (New York, 1989), 12.
10. James Riley, *Sickness, Recovery, and Death: A History and Forecast of Ill Health* (London, 1989): "Although the feature most remarked upon of this panorama of risks has been its intensity—the probability of dying in an epidemic—the most remarkable feature of it appears, in the formulation offered here, to be the probability of being ill repeatedly. . . . the ordinary individual appears to have experienced both a continuing series of infectious diseases and the risk of concurrent infections." What surprises Riley is how many people survived these diseases over and over again; see pp. 112–14.
11. Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, *Patient's Progress: Doctors and Doctoring in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1989), 174; and Elizabeth Burton, *The Pageant of Georgian England* (New York, 1967).

was fairly long, but these longer lives were apparently punctuated by a series, often repetitive, of illnesses.¹²

The letters of Carter and Montagu record their sufferings with fleeting illness as well as their struggles with chronic conditions throughout their long lives. In a letter to Elizabeth Vesey, Carter comments on the pervasiveness of her headaches: "As every external remedy has failed, my mind has long been accustomed to submit quietly and cheerfully to that condition of health which seems to be inseparably connected with the principles of my constitution" (3:231, 6 December 1763). And a few years later, she cautions her friend, "do not be in any manner of concern about me. The head-ache you know belongs to me, as much as any thing external can" (3:309, 13 October 1766). Her letters repeatedly record the physical discomforts with which she is familiar. Similarly, in a letter to her husband, Montagu refers to her perpetual ill health by informing him, "I am so well in health, that I do not know myself, and I think I am a little like the humorous Lieutenant, that would run no hazards while he was well, though he was prodigal of life, when he had a pain in his side."¹³ Throughout the correspondence, both women stress the prominence of ill health in their lives.

In many of their epistolary representations of illness, their bodies become the Body of "A Dialogue." Self is separated from body, which is distracting, irritating, or incapacitating; but the demands of the body claim the attention of mind/self: "I do not know what to say for my idleness last post," writes Montagu to her sister from Whitehall, "but indeed I was so oppressed by a cold, I could not disengage my mind from its attention to a disordered body, long enough to write a line" (1:121, 1740). In Montagu's apology, the similarities to the terms of Carter's poem are striking: the mind is responsible for writing—a kind of intellectual pursuit—but is prevented from this pleasant task by the need to attend to the body. Significantly, where Montagu blames the body for hampering the mind, Carter's chronic physical distemper was often blamed, by others, on a kind

12. See Riley, *Sickness, Recovery, and Death*, passim. Significantly, neither Elizabeth Carter nor Catherine Talbot married; Elizabeth Montagu married, but she bore only one child (John, "Punch"), who died while teething. Although Talbot died of cancer when she was just short of forty-nine, Montagu lived eighty years and Carter eighty-eight. Neither Carter nor Montagu suffered anything as serious as the cancer that killed Talbot; Montagu even managed to avoid the smallpox that marked her sister. She was unsuccessfully inoculated several times over her life and lived in perpetual fear of exposure; Carter was convinced that her friend must have contracted a minor form of smallpox (probably from inoculation) that provided her with immunity: "I should be more alarmed at your being in such infected air, if I had not long ago comforted myself with the persuasion that you have had this vile disorder, though I think you are perfectly right to keep out of the contagion" (*Letters from Carter to Montagu*, 3:108, 22 September 1783).
13. *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, with Some of the Letters of Her Correspondents, 1720–1761*, 4 vols. (1809–13; New York, 1974), 3:169–70, 30 September 1751.

of neglect as she catered to her mind.¹⁴ Montagu Pennington, Carter's nephew and rather sententious editor, attributes his aunt's ailments to study habits when young. He reports that she was a slow but determined scholar, "and her unwearyed application injured her health, and probably laid the foundation of those frequent and severe head-achs, from which she was never afterwards wholly free." Pennington reports that her disciplined study schedule meant that she customarily rose very early (between four and five o'clock) and also retired very late, keeping herself awake to study with a combination of green tea, snuff, a wet towel around her head, and another wet cloth on her stomach. Pennington suggests that forcing herself to remain awake was "to the great injury of her health, for she was always very much inclined to sleep, slept soon, and very soundly, even in her chair."¹⁵ In her biographical work on Montagu, Emily Climenson mentions Carter's "excruciating headaches," and recounts that "Lord Bath said that if she would drink less green tea, take less snuff, and not study so much, they would disappear."¹⁶ Sylvia Myers has traced the first mention of her headaches to a letter from Carter's father when she was in London, "in which he says he has heard that she has been having headaches, and advises her not to study so hard."¹⁷ Carter herself seems to have rejected this explanation for her persistent headaches, variously blaming overexertion in social settings, the weather, and a lack of exercise—ultimately, like Montagu, representing her mind as the victim of her head.

This representation of the body echoes the Body of Carter's poem. In "A Dialogue," poor Mind complains:

I did but step out, on some weighty affairs,
To visit, last night, my good friends in the stars,
When, before I had got half as high as the moon,

14. In this, Carter is not alone. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, for example, reports a discussion in which acquaintances of hers "fell into good-natured discourse of the ill consequences of too much application, and remembered how many apoplexies, gouts, and dropsies had happened amongst the hard students of their acquaintance"; *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 3 vols., ed. Robert Halsband (Oxford, 1965–67), 3:217, 19 July 1759. In her midcentury poem "The Headache. To Aurelia," Mary Leapor represents her own headaches as sinister punishment for her poetry: "For camps and headaches are our due: / We suffer justly for our crimes, / For scandal you, and I for rhymes"; Lonsdale, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 195–97.
15. Montagu Pennington, *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, with a New Edition of Her Poems; To Which are Added, Some Miscellaneous Essays in Prose, Together with Her Notes on the Bible, and Answers to Objections Concerning the Christian Religion*, 4th ed, 2 vols. (London, 1825), 9, 22.
16. Emily J. Climenson, *Elizabeth Montagu: The Queen of the Blue-Stockings. Her Correspondence from 1720 to 1761*, 2 vols. (London, 1906), 1:207.
17. Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1990), 58.

You despatched Pain and Languor to hurry me down;
Vi & Armis they seized me, in midst of my flight,
 And shut me in caverns as dark as the night.

(Lines 23–28)

Similarly, throughout the correspondence, the body is often represented as a confining, petulant force, weighing down Carter's mental self and hindering Montagu's pleasures, both intellectual and social. Many of Carter's letters begin with an apology similar to this one, offered to Montagu: "I should before this, my dear friend, have answered your kind letter, had I not been absolutely disqualified by a bad fit of the headache. I find a much greater obstacle to writing from want of health, than from want of leisure" (3:82, 7 August 1778). Early in their friendship, Carter explains to Montagu that her aching head confines her to bed an average of two days per week (1:47, 20 June 1759), and although she finds this an inconvenience, she reports that she cannot control the influence her body has on her intellectual life: "I am too sensible of the mischievous consequence of being obliged so often to keep to my bed: but I cannot avoid it. I sometimes struggle out a day's head ach in great pain and inability of doing any thing: but the usual effect of this effort is being obliged to take to my bed the next, and having two bad days instead of one" (1:286–87, 3 November 1765). Repeatedly, Carter represents herself as the victim of an unpredictable, demanding body that frustrates her best intentions.

For Montagu, it is not so much her writing as her social converse that suffers because of the constraints imposed by her body. As a vivacious, energetic woman, known for the intellectual exchanges at her London parties and her extensive social life, Montagu found the indolence forced upon her by her body to be inconvenient and frustrating. During one period of ill health, Carter praises her for "submitting to the prescription of indolence. Indeed one can scarcely imagine how such an active spirit as yours can comply with such a regimen, unless Dr. Mousey [*sic*] has put you into a bottle hermetically sealed" (1:21, 13 January 1759). Later, Carter, who refused to blame her headaches on her own mental pursuits, cautions Montagu about the possible effects of mental exertion:

If you were a sober economical gentlewoman . . . I should be much more inclined to lament the weakness of your eyes, than I am at present; as I believe it will prove a salutary restraint on those intellectual riots in which you would too naturally be hurried, and which might lavish away all the health which you have been acquiring during the course of your penance at Tunbridge. (2:150–51, 22 July 1772)

Sometimes, for Montagu, it is not ill health but merely the danger of ill health that necessitates the curbing of certain activities; Carter cautions her about over-activity and praises her for practicing restraint.¹⁸ Montagu's body, not unlike her unpredictable and often irritating husband, is something to be soothed and humored. It is a kind of petulant companion to the self that compels compromise in the interests of domestic harmony and peace.

A MIND-BODY PARTNERSHIP

That the body is often represented as a hindrance in the correspondence of Montagu and Carter is hardly surprising. What is surprising is that the body is sometimes represented quite otherwise. At times the relationship between body and mind does not appear as the antagonistic marriage of Carter's poem but rather as a cooperative companionship in which the body supports, enables, and even absolves the self, which is identified with the mind. Sometimes this body is a grounding force, acting as a kind of conscience that provides a welcome reasonableness and stability to the intemperate mind. From Bristol, for example, Carter writes, "An aching head is an excellent antidote against the extravagances of a giddy one; and by this security, in spite of all the infection of the Pump-room, and my very little care to prevent catching it, I remain as wise, and as sober, and as dull, as if I dwelt opposite to it, in some hermitage on the side of the rock" (*Letters from Carter to Montagu*, 1:46, 20 June 1759). Here, the physical head grounds the metaphorical head. Although Carter's letter registers, not without wit, a degree of disappointment regarding her sober state, it also implies that her wisdom results, to a certain degree, from the check her health provides on an inclination toward frivolousness and extravagance. In a similar vein, Carter suggests that illness might work as an antidote to outrageous behavior in the British Parliament. She asks:

Do not you think it might tend very much to the quiet and good order of these nations, if many of the speakers in both Houses, had

18. See, for example, a letter of 14 November 1771: "I most highly applaud your resisting the evening society, which would have succeeded a fatiguing morning. I hope, *de tems en tems*, to be informed that you persevere in this laudable opposition to seduction, and then I shall flatter myself with the happiness of finding you in full possession of all that treasure of health, which you collected from the air and water of Tunbridge" (2:127); and another of 22 November 1775: "you have already begun to exhaust yourself with company. That society, to a certain degree, is good for your health and spirits, I believe, but it should be under strict regulations. If you would make it a part of your invitation to dinner, that all people are to go away at seven o'clock, or that if they stay longer, you would retire, all would be well; but if you exhaust your strength and spirits on them, you had better have travelled your thousand miles, and been out of their reach" (2:344).

such health as you and I have? I do not by this in any degree propose to make an exchange, as it is by no means clear whether it would do any good to ourselves or the world, if we had such health and strength as they have. (2:345, 22 November 1775)

Although Carter seems to insinuate that dubious health would provide a desirable grounding or sobering effect on members of Parliament, she does not embrace the idea of an exchange of roles, even in her fantasy. This reluctance possibly registers modesty—good health would be wasted on her—however, it also implies that health and strength would not provide the necessary condition for the good she already does do, intellectually, in the world. Her bodily infirmity contributes to her mental nature, and not in the obvious negative ways.

The body grounds and it also, more seriously, absolves. Both Carter and Talbot seem to have suffered from bouts of what today we would call depression, which they referred to as a “splenetick disposition” or as a particular condition of spirits—“languor of spirits,” for example—“spirits” represented in opposition to the body.¹⁹ For Carter and Talbot, this state appears to have been accompanied by a sense of shame and by the desire to hide it from others. Early in their relationship Carter confesses to Montagu:

[T]hough I am really much inclined to be pleased and amused, I have such a strange languor of spirits, and such a painful lassitude in endeavouring to exert them, as is not easy to be imagined by any one who has never experienced it. This is a disposition to which I have always been, in some degree, by fits, subject; and the events of last year have, I believe, greatly contributed to increase it. I write this account of myself to you, because I write only to you, for it is a secret with which very few people are to be entrusted, unless one would chuse to be thought whimsical or discontented. (1:39, 23 April 1759)

Carter’s letter demonstrates the considerable trust placed in her relatively new friendship with Montagu, and it is particularly poignant in its vulnerability. Fifteen years earlier, she had to be coaxed to reveal her depressive tendency by Talbot’s assurance that she understood Carter’s problem from her own experience: “it would be a great consolation to me, to know what had occasioned the whimsical fit of spleen you complained of; . . . pray be charitable enough to gratify my curiosity. I promise you I will receive it with true sisterly candour, as I am so

19. See *Letters between Talbot and Carter*, 1:52–53, 19 May 1744; *Letters from Carter to Montagu*, 1:38–40, 23 April 1759; see also *Carter to Montagu*, 1:21, 21 January 1759, where the distinction and connection is made between spirits and corporeal health: “Indeed my health and spirits have been much more affected than I have ever discovered.”

great a sufferer in that way myself" (1:52–53, 10 May 1744). Talbot may empathize, but there is no guarantee that she will sympathize with Carter. Talbot's letter continues by explaining that she suffers her own depression "against [her] conscience," and she asserts, "I have no notion that any body can be seriously in the spleen; I think a very little serious reflection enough to set life and all its concerns in a very different light from that in which fancy places it upon every little vexation" (1:53, 10 May 1744).

The depressions that the two suffered were experienced and represented within the context of medical discourses that prevailed during the eighteenth century and that were particularly complex and contradictory, as the relationship between body and mind was increasingly represented by a model of nervous physiology rather than the circulation of the four humors. According to the humoral theories of the body, psyche and soma affected each other in a kind of fluid relationship. This interaction between mind and body was also a cornerstone of an evolving medical discourse influenced by Thomas Willis, who gave us "nerves," and George Cheyne, whose *English Malady* (1733) "identified the spleen, vapours, lowness of spirits, hypochondriacal and hysterical distempers as constituting the cluster of nervous diseases to which he believed the English were especially prone."²⁰ The nervous system was a new way of mapping the mind-body integration central to the older, holistic humoral theories, but it registered several decided changes. The most significant was that the mind gained a new primacy as the seat of physical well-being, a portal through which everything was channeled, often privileged as the causal factor in all illness. Because the mind could produce and cure various ills, "state of mind" became an essential component in maintaining good health.²¹

The Bluestocking correspondence both embraces and resists this evolving medical philosophy and physiology. The numerous discussions between the women about nerves and nervous constitutions demonstrate their awareness of and participation in this emerging medical discourse. Carter often discusses the effect of the weather on her "elasticity" and the adverse effect of the "damp" or "relaxing" weather on her "weak nerves." But the mind is just as likely to act on

20. W. F. Bynum, "The Nervous Patient in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Psychiatric Origins of British Neurology," in *Anatomy of Madness*, 1:89–102 at 91. See also Robert Martensen, "The Transformation of Eve: Women's Bodies, Medicine and Culture in Early Modern Europe," in Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich, eds., *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science* (Cambridge, 1994), 107–33.
21. G. S. Rousseau, "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility," *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, no. 3, ed. R. F. Brissenden and J. C. Eade (Toronto, 1976), 137–57 at 155. Rousseau affirms that, "all diseases, not merely those considered hysterical and hypochondriacal, were eventually classified as 'nervous' and . . . internalised by persons of fashion as visible emblems of refinement and delicacy."

the body, in terms of the new role of nerves. When Carter's nephew was gravely ill, for example, she reported to Montagu that "the danger of this poor little boy; and the distress of his parents, you will easily imagine have hurt my nerves" (1:209, 24 December 1763).

Carter in particular refuses to embrace the newer medical paradigm completely, although her letters are littered with the language of nervous physiology. She often reconfigures popular medical discourse in order to avoid its moral implications. One of the possible consequences of the popular eighteenth-century theory that the mind affected and even effected illness was that, as Dorothy and Roy Porter remark, "every disease, every pain, had its meaning, and meanings typically had their moral."²² Within the Bluestocking correspondence, the moral implications of illness are particularly acute in the discussions between Carter and Talbot regarding depression. In her exchanges with Talbot, Carter resists popular nervous discourse, adamantly arguing for depression's somatic rather than psychic origin. Talbot, on the other hand, seems to regard her depression as a mental state that has undesirable consequences for the body. She laments to Carter, "spirits that have any thing of delicacy are easily and strongly affected, and influence the body so as to make it a very troublesome companion, and I know nothing one would not do to avoid being nervous" (1:152, 21 June 1746). Throughout their correspondence, Carter attempts to comfort her friend by arguing against the representation of depression as morally problematic. At one point she admonishes, "but the low spiritedness, my dear Miss Talbot, of which you complain, assures me you cannot be well, nor ever will be, while you have the strange imagination, that a weak system of nerves is a moral defect, and to be cured by reason and argument" (2:156, 14 February 1754).

Talbot remained unconvinced, and, almost a decade later, she wrote to Carter, "I am convinced now that *bad nerves* (as one is pleased to call the indulgence of humour) are little short of a mortal sin. They disgrace one's best principles, grieve one's best friends, and make one's whole being ungrateful" (3:2, 14 May 1762). Significantly, in her response to this letter, Carter refuses to engage directly with the issue of whether melancholy is sinful. Rather, she insists that Talbot's mental distress has a physical cause. Carter writes:

My real intention was to make you judge more equitably of yourself, to remove the painful imagination that there was any thing voluntary in an inactivity, the mere effect of constitutional disorder. . . . Your mind, my dear friend, has the dispositions of angelic natures: but your constitution has alas too much of the weakness

22. Dorothy and Roy Porter, *In Sickness and in Health*, 72.

of frail mortality. . . . In this state of imperfection, the kind and extent of our duties must be regulated by the extent of our animal powers. To these, beyond a certain degree, no effort of resolution can make the least addition: and you might just as reasonably accuse yourself for not being able to fly. (3:6–7, 17 May 1762)

Carter repeatedly insists that Talbot's melancholy is physical at its root—resisting popular medical discourse by arguing that “nerves” are primarily of the body rather than the mind. This insistence suggests not that she disagrees with Talbot but rather that she agrees. They both view a primarily mental or spiritual depression as a moral lapse—perhaps a reflection of their Christian beliefs. Regardless of how fashionable affective nervous complaints may have become over the century, depression—the first step on the rocky road to despair and the turning away from God—has always been morally complex for the pious. And the letters between Carter and Talbot suggest that depression escapes censure only if it can be represented as somatic in origin.

On one level, this representation of the body does not seem very different from “Body” in Carter's poem, or the body that restricts Carter and Montagu by enveloping them in illness. In both cases, the body appears to control and constrain the mind/self. I suggest, however, that context and tone create the difference, nuanced though it may be. When it comes to depression, the body is not being blamed for hindering the self; rather, the self (Talbot) is being liberated, freed because the burden can be laid on the body. In 1773, for example, Carter writes to Montagu that the final years of Swift's life, “which in any other view, form so deplorable a part of the history of such a genius, appear in a comfortable light, when they are considered as merely being proofs that his aberrations from decency, and his neglect of, or want of attention to religion, did not proceed from a corrupted heart, or from scepticism; but from physical infirmity” (2:198, 12 June 1773). And, in reference to Elizabeth Vesey, whose behavior was becoming more erratic and disturbing as she aged, Carter writes to Montagu that “much allowance is due where the mind is weakened by bodily disorders” (3:279, 30 August 1787). In these cases, moral judgment is suspended because of the somatic scapegoat, and the body provides a kind of moral absolution that cannot be granted to the mind alone.

THE BODY AS CONSPIRATOR

Often, in the correspondence, the body also appears in a more active or potentially active role than that of grounding or absolving. It functions as an ally, enabling the choice of pleasurable pursuits and providing a way around the socially

prescribed duties and functions that must have structured a very great proportion of these women's lives. Once she married, Montagu's life was largely dominated by her husband, although she did become fairly adept at manipulating him for her own purposes. Similarly, Elizabeth Carter's first duty was to her father; both during his life and after his death she took all of her family responsibilities seriously, tutoring one nephew for Oxford and hosting the visits of various other relations. The correspondence reveals that the prescribed duties of these women often took considerable energy, and in one of her letters Carter cautions the weary Montagu, "do not harass your health by more business and engagements than your reason, not your imagination, pronounces to be necessary. Take notice, as a good woman at whom I ungraciously laughed, used to say to me, that you are flesh and blood, and not iron and steel" (1:375, 25 November 1767). Significantly, this flesh and blood is frequently represented as a morally and socially acceptable excuse for pursuing one's own pleasures. As a young married woman, Montagu yearned for the society and intellectual stimulation of Tunbridge Wells. Unfortunately, her husband was not fond of the place and preferred to stay at home. Montagu explains her difficulty to her cousin Mr. West:

You cannot imagine I should not be glad to come to Tunbridge, where I have always improved my stock of health, and have acquired such valuable friends, . . . but Mr. Montagu is happier here. . . . My constitution is not so strong, that it would not receive benefit by the waters, but I cannot say I am ill, and must content myself with the advantages of air and exercise which this situation affords. (3:309, 13 July 1755?)

Montagu's letter almost laments the fact that she is not unwell enough to warrant a visit that was against her husband's desires. His wishes come first, but the passage makes it clear that if she were ill, her body would provide the necessary justification for satisfying her wishes.

At times this corporeal potential is realized, and, in fact, pursuit of health did on many occasions afford Montagu the intellectual society of Tunbridge Wells. Similarly, although Carter's headaches most often frustrated her attempt to write letters, sometimes, particularly in her younger years, they provided the excuse she needed to take the time to write.

I write to you, dear Miss Talbot, to the sound of a fiddle: not that I am dancing, but within the sound of people who are. All the world is gone to the assembly, and I am at least as well amused at home in bed with the head-ache, regaling myself with balm and lavender, and regaling myself still more with the thoughts of how

much happier I am with the head-ache while my friends are at the assembly, than I should be if I were at the assembly, and they at home in bed. (2:339, 30 June 1760)

The headache that precludes submitting to the rigors of society does not necessarily interfere with intellectual pursuits; and it may facilitate the creation of an epistolary intellectual community. On one occasion she writes to Talbot, "A fit of the head-ache furnishes me for a plea to stay at home alone, and as talking is a mighty good remedy, I am going to chat with you the whole afternoon without interruption, a circumstance very rare in this racking place" (1:245, 20 January 1748). Here, the headache that is often said to curtail correspondence actually enables her writing. It provides time and opportunity in an otherwise hectic life filled with social obligations.

The illness of the body also affords an acceptable excuse for leaving things undone. Although there is a fine line between the body as hindrance and the body as excuse, a distinction is made by the Bluestockings themselves in the representation of their bodies. Montagu, for example, bemoans the fact that she cannot plead a physical excuse for not having written to Mr. West. She laments, "I am so ashamed that I cannot plead a broken arm, or some terrible disease or unhappy disaster, as the reason of my not thanking you for the favour of your last kind and obliging letter, that I hardly rejoice in the perfect health I am in" (3:315, 27 July 1755). Later, however, in a particularly colorful passage, Montagu can and does claim moral clemency based on the illness of her body:

I should make some apology for not having answered your letter, if I did not consider that an invalid is not a moral and accountable agent. It is a poor animal that has not ease enough to sleep, nor spirits enough to be awake, but with eyes half shut, half open, passes its time in a situation of mind between thought and delerium, to which the polite give the name of reverie. . . . In the order of beings it . . . ranks next to a creature you will find in my friend Mr. Stillingfleet's book, under the name of *Sloth*, which he represents to be without any quality that could make it loved, feared, or desired, but by certain piteous tones it moves compassion, and makes every one avoid hurting it: you may be assured that I am ready to claim all the privileges of my sister Sloth. (4:215–16, n.d.)

Montagu's representation echoes the discussion of depression between Carter and Talbot. The body provides an amnesty, functioning as a kind of essential scapegoat, guaranteeing forgiveness from others and ensuring moral absolution.

As in the discussion of depression, the body in these examples is not, in itself, markedly different from Body in Carter's poem. It is ill, or might become ill; it is tired; it is in pain. What distinguishes it from the rather vengeful Body that sends "pain and languor" to bring Mind back to her rightful place, though, is the variety of meanings assigned by the writers in their epistolary representations. Assigning meaning to the body gives these women a degree of agency within their letters (and perhaps within their lives). Carter and Montagu are not only victims of their bodies but also agents because of them. Carter resists the explanations others provide for her headaches, but she also resists consistency in the meanings she herself assigns. She determines whether the headache is caused by atmosphere or activity, and she determines whether the headache has prevented or enabled her. Similarly, Montagu regards her illnesses, variously, as inconvenient, as liberating, or as an acceptable excuse. Agency for these women rests in their control over the representation of illness. The correspondence situates them as the autonomous arbiters of the significance of their bodies, providing the context and owning the meaning.

THE BODY AS METAPHOR

The mind-body dualism is complicated not only through literal representations in this correspondence but also through metaphor, where intimate physical connection evokes the passion of intellectual communion, and body and mind are not separated but intertwined. In the Huntington Library's Montagu Collection, there is a letter from Montagu to Carter that is breathtaking in its intensity and vulnerability and in the power of the bodily metaphor so vividly described. Not surprisingly, this letter is not published in Matthew Montagu's collection of his aunt's letters, nor is it mentioned in Emily Climençon's edition. It is perhaps surprising that Matthew preserved this letter at all or that sections of it did not fall victim to his censoring pen—the brown ink that makes it impossible to read certain words and sentences in a number of the other letters. Perhaps, though, it is only in the wake of late-twentieth-century scholarship that we have a framework allowing us to be stunned by this letter, with its eroticism and its maternity, in which breast milk represents the complex relationship between Montagu and Carter.²³

23. Elizabeth Mavor's *The Ladies of Llangollen* (London, 1971); Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 1981); and Emma Donoghue's *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668–1801* (New York, 1993), among other works, have drawn our attention to a number of intense and passionate relationships between women in the eighteenth century.

The letter is dated 17 February 1759, but a note supplied by Sylvia Myers in the manuscript folder suggests that the letter is misdated, in fact being a response to Carter's letter of 13 March 1759. Carter and Montagu met in late 1757 or early 1758—their friendship was fairly new—and from the letters it seems that they had recently spent a significant amount of time together in London, Carter's visit occasioned by the illness of Talbot. Carter left London at the beginning of March to journey to Bristol with Talbot and her mother. There they remained until the following September. On 13 March 1759, Carter wrote to Montagu from Newbury: "It seems an immense time, since I have heard any thing of you my dear Mrs. Montagu; after being accustomed to the expectation of seeing you every day. . . . there are some hours in which I feel strangely vacant, at finding I know no more about you, than if I was in another planet. If you are at all sensible, how much I have set my heart upon finding a letter from you when I get to Bristol, I am sure you have too much good nature to disappoint me" (1:26–27). According to Myers, Carter was not disappointed, but whereas Carter simply declares her longing for Montagu's company—"I longed for you extremely the other night at Reading, to ramble by moonlight amongst the ruins of an old abbey"—Montagu's letter represents longing with physical metaphor. It is worth quoting in its entirety:

Dear Madam: I have ever had great compassion for infants at the period of their weaning, it is their first taste of regret and so perhaps may be more lively than after they are used and accustom'd to the breaking off agreeable habits; but then poor things they can whimper, cry, be peevish, thrust away with indignation the spoonfulls of tasteless pap that are offered to them in lieu of the soft nectar they had fed on, but we older children who have stronger passions and more discerning palates must not indulge complaints but be placid in disappointment and when our nectar'd bowl is taken from us must bow and simper over any tasteless or nauseous draught that is given to us; so our external manner [is] fashion'd but the economy within is mightily discomposed by this same weaning. I have not yet been able to reconcile myself to your departure. Twenty people have occupied the chair you used to sit in, they have offered me very good bread and milk, some have put sugar into it but I had no stomach to it; I was in hopes time would reconcile me to vulgar fare but on the contrary I grew more discontented and more impatient; you think perhaps you have been superlatively generous in writing to me twice, but your liberality has not furnish'd more than a base subsistence. I felt such an impatience for a

letter yesterday that if it had not arrived I really believe I should have whimpered. I think I could have justified myself if I had, how can my grief be childish when it is all that is not childish in me that weeps for the absence of Miss Carter! (MO 3024)²⁴

Here, Montagu represents herself as a child, confronted with the intense pain and frustration of being weaned from Carter, who does not merely have the breast; rather, she is the breast that is now lost to her friend.

This letter exhibits a tangible, almost unbearable physical desire. Its eroticism derives in part from the intensity of the detailed imagery and in part from the structure of the passage. After invoking the metaphor of weaning to describe Carter's departure, Montagu makes a distinction between a child, who can act out the pain and the anger and herself—with stronger passions that must be repressed. Her writing enacts this repression by moving away from the image, focusing on her adult self and providing a rational description—almost a report—of the number of people who have been to visit her. The “bread and milk” contains the echo of the earlier image, but the passage as a whole seems to be moving away from it. Suddenly, though, at the end of the passage, the two images are brought together again. The intensity of the weaning experience is refreshed with the repetition of the word “whimpered,” and it merges with the “stronger passions” and the intensity of “all that is not childish in me.” The result is that the powerful image of a hungry child fuses with the image of the bereft thirty-eight-year-old woman, whose yearning becomes both primal and erotic.

The power of this image captures the initial passion and excitement of the growing intimacy between Montagu and Carter, representing not only physical desire but also intellectual yearning. The first letter we have from Montagu to Carter notes the importance of intelligent converse to their relationship. Montagu writes:

I can perfectly understand why you were afraid of me last year, and I will tell you, for you won't tell me; perhaps, you have not told yourself; you had heard I set up for a wit, and people of real merit and sense hate to converse with wittings; as rich merchant-ships dread to engage with privateers: they may receive damage and can get nothing but dry blows. I am happy you have found out I am not to be feared; I am afraid I must improve myself much before you will find I am to be loved. If you will give affection for affection “tout simple,” I shall get it from you, and even if you won't part with it without other good qualities, I hope to get them of

24. Letters from the Montagu Collection in the Huntington Library are cited in the text by manuscript number.

you, if you will continue to me the happiness and advantage of your conversation. (4:75–76, 6 June 1758)

It is conversation, and particularly the exchange of ideas, that draws Montagu to Carter, and their letters provide a space for discussions about history, literature, politics, and about Carter's recently published *Epictetus* and Montagu's upcoming publication of her *Essay on Shakespear*. In fact, Montagu's admiration for Carter's translation of *Epictetus* probably inspired her to establish a connection. Elizabeth Eger comments that "Montagu and Carter were proud of each other's works as authors. . . . As authors of moral philosophy and Shakespeare criticism, Carter and Montagu shared the experience of making successful incursions into spheres still dominated by men, and they relied on each other's support and friendship in a world still hostile to learned women."²⁵ The intensity of their intimate relationship depended on the intellectual stimulation they provided for each other, and when they fantasized in their correspondence it was often about conversation. Early in their friendship, Carter admits to "pleasing [herself] in imaginary conversations with [Montagu]" (1:12, 1 November 1758). A few months later, she dreams, "instead of conversing at the distance of a hundred miles, you and I should have been sitting *tête-a-tête*, and we should have been the quietest, prettiest, properest company for each other imaginable. . . . What a number of subjects should we have discussed" (1:32–33, 31 March 1759). And ten years later, Montagu claims, "My imagination without wing or broom stick off mounts aloft, rises into ye Regions of pure space, and without lett or impediment bears me to your fireside, where you can set me in your easy chair, and we talk and reason, as angel Host and guest Aethereal should do, of high and important matters" (MO 3258, 10 October 1769). Here, Montagu's representation of ethereal conversation echoes Carter's "Mind," stepping out to converse with the stars, marking the importance of the intimacy created by mental exchange. Montagu's early letter to Carter recognizes and foreshadows this significance, and she emphasizes its importance by using the body as metaphor.

Thus, the early erotic passage signals intense physical longing, but that bodily desire also represents the intellectual conversation craved by Montagu. Carter's conversation is compared to a nectar, delicious and nourishing for Montagu—possibly the "good qualities" Montagu hoped to draw from Carter and her conversation. In this bleak vision of deprivation, however, the breast disappears, and Montagu is forced to try to sate herself with the unappetizing conversation of those who now occupy Carter's chair. Spoken conversation merges with written

25. *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738–1790*, gen. ed. Gary Kelly, 6 vols. (London, 1999), vol. 1; *Elizabeth Montagu*, ed. Elizabeth Eger (London, 1999), lx.

when Montagu grudgingly admits to having received two letters from Carter; however, she protests that these letters provide barely enough nourishment for survival. In Montagu's letter, ideas become breast milk, and their absence becomes physical starvation. The complexity of this passage—the blurring of the maternal and the erotic, of the adult and the child—and its raw emotional intensity show the importance of the intellectual relationship between these two women, and the body becomes a powerful metaphor for conversation and correspondence—for connection of a noncorporeal nature.

NEGOTIATING THE BODY

In 1761, after Carter had spent seven weeks of the summer with Montagu, Montagu wrote to her, responding to letters in which she wrote about the pain of separation:

How much I felt your kind disposition to turn back when you were on the stairs, I cannot express to you in words; there started a tear on reading that paragraph which declared the sentiment better. Words serve well for common occasions, but there are so many on which they cannot explain the movements of the heart, and the delicate feelings of the soul, that in a state of natural religion only, it would have helped to have convinced me of our being to exist in another life, in which we should not use an inadequate interpreter of our thoughts, as language is. Thought is of the soul, language belongs to body; we shall leave it in the grave with our other rags of mortality. (4:362–63, 6 September 1761)

By linking pure thought with soul (true self) and envisioning their eventual escape from body and language—these “rags of mortality”—Montagu's passage invokes the fantasy of corporeal transcendence. It echoes Carter's poem, and like it alludes to a long-standing dualistic heritage. However, Montagu's two sides are not antagonistic. Words, Montagu suggests, are necessary—they interpret, if inadequately—making pure thought intelligible. This passage is particularly poignant because it recognizes both that language is limited and that there is no alternative to it. By analogy, then, soul/mind may transcend the body after death, but until that point the body is necessary—as essential to the existence of the soul during its mortal tenure as language is to sustain communication and connection between minds. While the fantasy of transcendence is evident in this letter, the relationship between body and mind is more like that between thought and language—imperfect, but cooperative.

Montagu's analogy between body and language can be extended and complicated to encompass the letters upon which the friendships between these women depended. A letter communicates the presence of the writer just as language communicates thought, and body does soul. It is in some ways doubly limited because it is both constructed of language and marked by the body of the sender. Letters are intimately physical documents, an observation perhaps most applicable to handwritten letters, where the blank paper becomes, when covered with words, etched by the particulars of its writer. It is not only the words themselves but also the physical process of writing that stamps each letter with corporeal traces. In the Huntington collection, for example, Montagu's strong, relatively clear handwriting changes during illness and becomes more cramped, more difficult to read, as she ages and as her eyesight fades.

In a number of Carter's letters, the physical impact on the epistolary document is linguistically recorded. When her missives are interrupted by illness, letters often foreground the interruption: "I had begun a letter to you, my dear friend, last week," she writes to Montagu, "but my head prevented me from going on" (1:293, 25 December 1765). On another occasion she reports, "I have for this last ten days been too ill to walk, or almost to do any thing, (and this must account for this letter having been begun these four days)" (2:86, 3 October 1770). In these examples, the process of the writing parallels the condition of Carter's body. The letter remains suspended, like the body of the writer, waiting for the return to health. "Three days has this letter laid in my drawer, unfinished, so ill have I been," Carter writes to Montagu in December 1768 (2:15), and her description equates the poor, insufficient letter, languishing in the drawer, with Carter languishing in bed. In another letter, Carter provides a graphic example of the "writing-to-the-moment" technique so popular in eighteenth-century novels. She apologizes to Montagu for the quality of her penmanship, asserting, "I believe you will find it difficult to make out this scrawl, as I have been let blood in the midst of it" (1:307, 29 June 1766). Here, Carter's letter becomes a kind of body double, affected, like Carter's body itself, by the experience of blood-letting. The letter does not merely describe the body; rather it becomes a kind of partial textual embodiment, eventually cradled in the hands of the reader. As Montagu's erotic "weaning" passage makes clear, the letter is an inadequate substitute for the presence of the writer. However, like language and body—which Montagu suggests are imperfect but essential to mortal existence—and marked by both, the letter was essential to the intellectual relationships between the Bluestocking women.

Montagu's description of the relationship between thought and language, soul and body encapsulates the complex and nuanced relationship between body

and mind expressed throughout her correspondence with Carter and Carter's with Talbot. In Carter's poem, claiming a life of the mind for women involves inverting the conventional dualistic paradigm and devolving the burden of the body onto an "other" who functions like a confining, constraining, childish, and complaining husband; however, the epistolary relationship between these women suggests another kind of relationship between body and mind. Their letters suggest that claiming the life of the mind for women often means fighting against or succumbing to the heavy, confining chains of corporeal existence that hinder intellectual pursuits. But they also suggest that transcendence over the burdensome body is not the only way to claim a life of the mind. When the body is represented as conscience, moral absolution, excuse, and enabler, it liberates the mind not despite but because of the connection between them. When it is invoked as an erotic metaphor, it makes visible the intensity of the intellectual communion between Montagu and Carter; and when it becomes part of Montagu's analogy, the body interprets, translates, speaks. Body and language are united as essential to communication, to existence itself. The references in the correspondence to the physical letters themselves also mark the significance of the body. The letter is intimately connected to the body of the sender, and, because so much of the intellectual communication and friendship between these women was conducted through correspondence, the letter—and by metaphorical analogy the body—becomes the condition for the very existence of the intellectual relationships between them. While Carter's poem offers a radical challenge to the conventional gendering of this key Western dualism, the Bluestocking correspondence challenges the underlying premise of that dualism. According to Montagu, human communication, imperfect though it is, requires that thought be embodied in language. Similarly, claiming a life of the mind for women, these letters suggest, requires not freedom from or transcendence over, but a constant process of shifting negotiation with, the body.

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