

## THE WOMAN BENEATH THE SKIN (PART 1)

**ADAPTED excerpt from the book.**

by Barbara Duden

### **External Dangers to the Body**

If we ask what caused women's diseases, we come first of all to the idea of "mishap." A sudden shower could chill the blood, drive it inside, cause it to stagnate. Peasant girls corrupted themselves in the autumn season, "while combining flax in cold water, or in the winter when exposed to cold and damp." Cold wind on bare skin, an uncovered head in the rain, in fact merely a cool breeze blowing against the chest of a heated woman on her way home closed the pores and drove the blood inward, thus explaining violent cramps and epileptic seizures. Washing the feet with cold water during the period of the menses could cause a stubborn constipation of the monthly flow. "Mishaps" were incidents that affected the body from the outside, that happened to the body and made an impression upon it. The toils of daily work were very seldom experienced as causes of illness. However, everything out of the ordinary could work as an evil coincidence: anything entering through the mouth (be it a sausage or an overripe cherry), tripping over something, a bolt of lightning, cold air blowing on the face, a damp cloth around the chest.

Such seemingly trivial causes as nighttime dancing, wading through a stream, and a fall in an alley were given as much weight as triggering ailments as were wearing oneself out in the damp environment of a soap factory or at a loom. The spectrum of causes that really mattered had very little to do with injuries caused by toil, hardship, poverty, excessive work, with "class injustices." Even with women in their childbearing years, the wear and tear on their bodies caused by the rapid succession of pregnancies, abortions, and hemorrhages was not mentioned as a factor affecting their physical condition. Exhaustion from work was considered significant only if it was unusual. For example, a noblewoman complained of "shivering over the entire body and pains in the legs," because she had done something unusual by sitting down behind the spinning wheel one evening and driving it with her feet. This shows that the hierarchy of illness-causing phenomena was conceived as part of the logic of a life story, not as part of the logic of the body and such. The body was not the victim of the circumstances of life, especially not of daily, accustomed toil. Instead, it was a body that attracted and absorbed effects from outside. The soul, one's mood, and specific perceptions triggered an ailment.

In November 1735 a town physicus talked about the case of an "unmarried, pregnant person who had been injured by a beating." He recounts how he found the girl, "who one hour before had been so maltreated by a journeyman-bricklayer with blows from a stick that she had to be carried home. When I arrived, she still lay speechless and had convulsiones epilepticas." Storch noted the bruises on the skin; the girl, who "recovered her speech" during the visit, indicated where she had been kicked on the front part of the belly. Storch concluded: "Since no haemorrhagia uteri showed up, and the two blows I noticed did not seem of great importance, I maintain that the insultus epilepticus arose more from fright and anger than from the blows." After the fit of cramps the girl was constipated for three days and was given, in addition to antispasmodic powder, musk pellets to "loosen the belly."

A woman who was around thirty years old and "lived with her husband in continual anger, quarrel and dislike," was pregnant. In June 1731, "when she went into a hop-hill with a feeling of vexation and annoyance, and fatigued herself there by turning over the soil," she felt a bursting, a sudden hemorrhage in her lower abdomen. Even calming remedies could not prevent an abortion.

"A peasant's daughter, between nineteen and twenty years old, was married in 1737 to a young peasant who lived two miles from her parents. After she had been pregnant for four and a half months, she had a fierce quarrel with her husband and his parents and ran to her parents in an irate mood and with trembling limbs"; the next day she suffered an abortion.

In these stories we can catch only fleeting glimpses of the women's day-to-day existence. Yet these fragments of their lives form a pattern of the conflicts that provoked the women's anger. And they knew that they had to get rid of this anger, that the anger had to be discharged to prevent its getting stuck inside them. Thus they consulted the doctor for prescriptions.

## **HOW DO YOU GET RID OF ANGER?**

The doctor's prescriptions were supposed to accomplish the same things the women sought to do with household remedies: bloodletting to draw off the impetuous blood; purgatives to discharge gall and excrement; a drawing plaster of sourdough and herbs applied externally to the chest to entice outward movements pressing on the breast; hot wine or elderberry juice to drive out the stagnating monthly blood; wine and beer to soothe the "irate womb"; theriac to sweat out anger; purgatives to purify the poisoned milk of a nursing mother.

The frequency with which remedies were requested because a woman was angry reveals a perception of emotions actually inside the body, where they could be and had to be worked on. Emotions affected the body in very immediate and direct ways. Something bad had to be expelled from the inside to keep it from getting stuck and poisoning the inside. The remedies were "preventive," part of preventive care and actual treatment. But at the same time it permitted the idea that anger could be ameliorated with prescriptions.

Anger was real and metaphoric: a poisoned and tense relationship with the husband caused heartaches, trembling, and searing pain. The expulsive remedy prescribed by the doctor acted both physically and metaphorically. This external influence, by which the inside was transformed and which was discharged through the body openings, reveals a context of the person in which there was neither a demarcated, self-contained body nor a social environment that stopped abruptly at the skin. On the level of the body, the Eisenach stories about anger point to a society in which the concept of a body that could be isolated did not yet exist because an isolated individual did not exist. What did exist were people who were bound into social relations down to their innermost flesh.

A second element is also important. Anger as a quickly rising fit of temper was an emotion that had gotten out of control: the body's movements mirrored this uncontrolled reaction.

## **ANOTHER MAJOR PROBLEM (BESIDES ANGER) = FRIGHT!**

A twenty-nine-year-old noblewoman had the following "mishap" in September 1740: "After a violent fit of anger she had herself bled at the arm. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> she got an unexpected fright. A few hours later she suddenly fell to the ground and had to be carried to bed, senseless and with stiff limbs; the feet were cold, the face red, the teeth tightly clenched, the breath had stopped. A sudden violent movement of the breast occurred, after which the breathing consisted of strong snoring and wheezing. I had the feet warmed with bricks and let her body lie quiet and covered. After an hour her face turned pale, and the cramp, both in the limbs as well and in the jaw, subsided, so that I was able to administer an antispasmodic power. This was followed by vomiting and then a quiet sleep, after which she awoke again with her senses."

In the case of this young woman, two causes reinforced each other. A fit of anger was followed by a "fright." Fright was nearly as frequent a "mishap" as anger; young girls experienced it more often than older women, pregnant women and women in child bed in particular were threatened by it. Fright seems to have had an even more intimate relation to the women's two fluxes than anger. Fright "instantly" caused the monthly bleeding to stagnate. Unlike anger, an attack of fright "struck the limbs" and drove the blood to the heart. Heart constriction, anxiousness, fearfulness—these are the afflictions for which the women requested a prescription against fright. "At the time when her menses were flowing for the first time," a girl "was scared by intruding thieves, whereupon the menses stayed away from that very hour." A twenty-year-old woman was caught stealing at the time of her menses, "which immediately ceased, owing to the scare, and failed to reappear for two periods." The wife of a merchant, far advanced in her pregnancy, was caught in the rain outside the town and fell flat on her face while running; "upon her arrival she therefore requested such remedies as were meant for frights."

A major characteristic of fright was that it drove the blood inward and caused it to stagnate. The women spoke anxiously of their concern that their monthlies might therefore stagnate.

Fright was caused by something sudden, something unexpected. The triggering incident varied: a mouse that jumped at a pregnant woman; a quarrel between neighbors; a fight between drunks; a husband who got into a fight; a thunderstorm; fireworks; two sons who started quarreling upon arriving at home and stabbed each other in the arm; a thunderbolt; a fire in the neighborhood; being barked at by a dog; finally, great alarms in a family—a husband was brought home seriously injured, a child suddenly had trouble breathing, a sister died unexpectedly.

Thoroughly unusual incidents and extreme occurrences caused fright. A “spectacular fright from a villainous thief and beggar” struck a freshly married young noblewoman early in her first pregnancy, “when he...fell down and feigned an epileptic fit.” After this encounter she had imprinted on her mind his fall and contortions such that she soon thereafter complained of headaches that were similar to a congested head cold, and the nose...began to bleed.” Subsequently she had seventeen epileptic fits and gave birth to a dead child, which bore in its body the marks of the mother’s terrible contortions.

Fright and anger almost seem to have complemented each other like mirror images. Both affected the body, though in opposite ways: fright penetrated, drove the blood from the limbs to the heart, caused the heart to tighten, to suffocate under the abundance of blood. Anger caused the blood to surge to the periphery, toward the head, into the limbs, into the womb, where it caused cramps by its surging. In extreme cases the women had convulsions and cramps after fright as well as anger. IN SUMMARY: The body mediated external incidents as well as fits of anger that arose inside and in which the self thought to defend itself. In both cases similar remedies were taken to reestablish the balance: remedies to reopen the body.