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‘In order to spirituall good the body often afflicted’: Bodily Affliction in Lady Mary Carey’s Conversion Narrative (1649-57)

Rachel Adcock

In seventeenth century narratives of conversion, the body and spirit were seen to be inextricably intertwined. The body’s appetite for carnal pleasures was thought to tempt the soul from its spiritual path towards salvation, and during the process of conversion the body was often afflicted by the various means that God used to mortify sin in his chosen people. In the manuscript conversion narrative of the seventeenth century noblewoman Lady Mary Carey, entitled ‘A Dialogue betwixt the Soul, and the Body’ (1649), she noted in one of the margins that ‘in order to spirituall good[,] the body often afflicted’.¹ This article will go on to consider the importance of bodily affliction in Carey’s religious experiences, particularly how she interpreted it as integral to her spiritual health. At the time of her writing, Lady Carey (c.1609-1680) had been married twice, firstly to Sir Pelham Carey (a younger son of Henry Carey, first earl of Dover) between 1630 and 1642, and from 1643 to her second husband George Payler. From 1639 to 1642 Payler was a paymaster of the garrison in Carey’s place of birth, Berwick upon Tweed, Northumberland, but after their marriage he subsequently accepted duties in the Tower of London and later became MP for Berwick in 1659. Though Carey clearly held her husband in high regard, she kept her first husband’s name throughout her life, which Sara Mendelson suggests was ‘because of his titled status’.² Her first marriage did not leave any living children, and it was Carey’s struggle to comprehend the deaths of those conceived during her second marriage that provoked her to record her experiences on paper. By the time she wrote her ‘Dialogue’ in 1649 (her first surviving work), Carey had lost three children (two boys and one girl) and was pregnant with a fourth, Robert, who died soon after his birth in 1650. The death of another boy, Peregrine, in 1652, was happily followed by the birth of a girl, Bethia (1653/4), and a boy, Nathaniel (1654/5) who both lived to adulthood, though in 1657 Carey wrote that she had experienced a miscarriage on which she wrote her most well known poem, ‘Upon ye Sight of my abortive Birth’. These traumatic experiences are recorded and interpreted in Carey’s manuscript writings, showing how she reconciled herself to the belief that God was teaching, cleansing, and refining her through these bodily afflictions, for her spiritual improvement.

Carey’s collection of manuscript writings, written between 1649 and 1657, records her conversion through the means of dialogue, narrative, meditation, and elegy, and explore the relationship between physical ‘affliction’ and ‘spiritual good’ in different ways. Her conversion on her sickbed when she was 18 years old is depicted in a dialogue, while her elegies on her children’s deaths are written in tightly controlled verse.

¹ Bodleian Library, MS. Rawlinson D.1308, 14r. Subsequent references to the work are placed in parentheses following the quotation. This is a transcription of Lady Mary Carey’s manuscript made in 1681 by Charles Hutton. The original manuscript is in the hands of the Meynell family.
Carey’s writings explore the nature and purpose of physical affliction in conversion, questioning and interpreting its meaning in the framework of her conversion process from an obsession with vain company, to a life devoted to praising God. Her poems on child loss have usually been considered as single documents, rather than as part of a conversion narrative, but this article will consider how, together with her dialogue and meditations, they make up part of a larger work indicating the continual process of sanctification in seventeenth century Puritan experience. Carey’s writings draw attention to the importance of exploring physical affliction and the assault on the believer’s senses, as part of the seventeenth century conversion narrative. For instance, what was the relationship between the soul and body in conversion, and why was physical affliction thought integral to religious experience? This article will consider these questions.

‘A Dialogue betwixt the Soule, and the Body’
Lady Mary Carey composed her conversion narrative, ‘A Dialogue betwixt the Soule, and the Body’, while she was pregnant with her fourth child in 1649. After the birth and death of this child, named Robert, she dedicated the manuscript to her husband George Payler in 1653, explaining that she had written the work in expectation that she would die in childbirth, and experience ‘a combat with Sathan at the last’ (2r). In order to ‘answer’ Satan when he was contesting for her soul, she gathered the evidence that she was one of the God’s elect, and destined for ‘endlesse Glory’ (2r), and set this down in a paper book so that she could refer to comforting scriptures and experiences if she needed to. Carey did not die in childbirth, and so presented her husband with ‘the poore mite of [her] endeavours’ (4v) that he could add to his spiritual treasury, encouraging him to continue his path towards spiritual joy. She writes: ‘Truely my Deare, you are high in my Thoughts, and deservedly, God hath begun a Worke in thee, which he will performe, Phillipians.1.6. I partly know the Change which God hath made in thee, both inwardly, and outwardly, from what, and to what’ (4v). Carey intends her narrative to encourage her husband’s continual conversion to her own spiritual path: she later thanks God for making them both ‘of one Mind’ as their ‘Judgments are one, our Wills, our Way, our Aimes in Spiritualls’ (6r). Even in the ‘separating troubles’ of the Civil Wars, Carey and her husband are shown to be united in their faith and experience. She evidently moved with him from their home town of Berwick to London when he became an Officer of the Ordnance and Armoury at the Tower of London, and accompanied him on military campaigns. When her conversion narrative was transcribed by Charles Hutton in 1681, in fair copy, it appeared alongside Lord Thomas Fairfax’s memoirs of the civil war, and an elegy on his death by the Duke of Buckingham. Hutton’s inclusion of Carey’s work in this collection indicates that it was considered by him to be an example of pious

3 Until recently, Carey’s poems were only available in Germaine Greer, Jeslynn Medoff, Melinda Sansone, and Susan Hastings (eds.), Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of 17th Century Women’s Verse, Virago, 1988. The poems will soon appear with extracts from her conversion narrative and meditations in Rachel Adcock, Sara Read, and Anna Warzycha (eds.), Flesh and Spirit: An Anthology of Writings by Seventeenth-Century Women, Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2013. I would like to thank my co-editors for their valuable input at various stages of the research presented in this article.

parliamentarianism worth preserving.

The form of Carey’s conversion narrative is integral to the way it works as an instructional work, intended, as she wrote, for advising and encouraging her husband if she could no longer do this in person. Her narrative consists of a dialogue between two entities, the Soul and the Body, drawing on the popular medieval genre where, faced with divine judgement, Soul and Body discuss which of them is to blame for the sins a damned man has committed in life. These dialogues were in part didactic, asking the listener to compare themself to the damned man whose Body has committed fleshly sins, further confirmed by the accusations of the Soul. However, as Rosalie Osmond writes, there is no resolution to these debates, only an imposed conclusion in which ‘devils seize the soul and bundle it off to hell, shouting that that the body will inevitably follow at the last judgment’.5 While Carey believed herself to be near death, her dialogue between the Soul and Body turns its attention to the relationship between the two entities present in her own living body as she undergoes the process of conversion. Rather than the soul and body antagonising each other, as was the case in seventeenth century dialogues following the medieval tradition (including Andrew Marvell’s ‘A Dialogue between the Soul and Body’), Michelle M. Dowd notes that ‘Carey’s Soul and Body pursue an entirely congenial exchange’.6 Whereas Platonic philosophy held that the Soul was morally superior to the corrupt Body, Carey’s entities correspond more with St. Paul’s descriptions of the ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’, where both were believed to be corrupt until the process of conversion, or regeneration, had taken place within the individual believer: Ephesians 4:24 called this putting on the ‘new man’. The spirit had to overcome the desires of the flesh in order for both to be regenerate: for St. Paul, then, the ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ referred, rather than two distinct entities, to the ‘two ways of life which the whole man [could] choose to follow’? For instance, Romans 7:22-3 described the inward conflict between spiritual obedience and fleshly desire: ‘I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members [limbs], warring against the law of my mind’. While Carey’s Soul and Body express different opinions, Body very clearly identifies that its fate rests on the spiritual regeneration of the Soul:

Body: But, my Sister, Thou knowest that when I shall be dissolved, thou wilt leave me, and goe immediately to thy place; but I must lye in grave, rot, putrefie, and have no enjoyment until our re-uniting, and therefore, my deare Soule, let me know what I may then hope for, that so I may lye downe, In peace, and expectation. (8r-v)

On death, Body says, its sister Soul will ascend to its place in heaven, while the body must rot in the grave until the two are again united at the last judgment, hoping that will result in eternal life for them both. With this in mind, Body reflects Carey’s own fears that she will face death in child labour, uncertain whether she will be one of God’s elect: ‘I am now neare the time of my Travell, & am very weake, faint, sickly, fearefull, pained, apprehending much sufferings before me, if not Death it selfe, the King of Terrours’ (7v). Soul replies by comforting Body with scriptures suitable for those in affliction, and advises that Body’s ‘strength is no helpe in Gods Worke’ because

5 Rosalie Osmond, Mutual Accusation: Seventeenth-Century Body and Soul Dialogues in their Literary and Theological Context, University of Toronto Press, 1990, p. 56.
7 Osmond, Mutual Accusation, p. 18.
God’s strength is ‘all sufficient’ (7v): as long as the Body has faith in God, death has no sting. Carey’s Soul and Body have a mutually beneficial and loving relationship. Soul is Body’s comforter, adviser, and friend, which testifies to the process of regeneration that Carey has already undergone, while Body encourages Soul to remember and record experiences of God’s love and continue this process.

This inward dialogue, dramatised by Carey’s Body and Soul, is characteristic of Puritan forms of introspection. Believers were encouraged by their ministers to record evidence that they were one of God’s elect, and draw on these in times of hardship, both physical and spiritual. In Carey’s dialogue, Body is preparing for the ‘last Battaile’ of child labour, and asks Soul to draw ‘Water out of the Wells of Salvation’ of Isaiah 12:3. ‘Meditation (of Mercy),’ she writes, ‘is a Bucket wch will come full up with spirituall Joy’ (9v-10r). Soul then begins to recount the foundations of Carey’s faith, reciting the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, compiled by the Westminster Assembly in 1647 and submitted to the Long Parliament a year after, to instruct the laity, including children, in doctrinal matters via a series of questions and answers. This catechism replaced that of the Book of Common Prayer between 1648 and 1661, and advocated the further reformation of the Church of England along Calvinistic lines. Carey has her Soul recite answers from the catechism, which included confirming her belief in God, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and Original Sin, including the most relevant to the Body’s plight, and paraphrasing where necessary, adding scriptural examples, and some answers of her own. Re-appropriation of the catechism in this way was expected and encouraged: the printed catechism advised that a ‘Learner may further improve it upon all occasions, for his increase in knowledge and piety, even out of the course of catechising, as well as in it’. Early modern women were expected to catechise children and servants, and written catechisms were intended, in part, for this use. As well as learning from this catechism, Carey perhaps also intended its use by her own unborn child should it survive her, as a mother’s legacy in place of her own physical presence. However, after surviving child labour and the death of her fourth son, Carey re-addressed her work to her husband four years later, hoping to encourage him on his own spiritual journey. The existence of such advice for a husband rather than a child is unusual, and Carey’s modest description of herself as ‘a weake Help’ (4r) and her work, ‘the poore Mite of my Endeavours’ (4v), depicts her as a reluctant but pious author. She attributes her urge to write to her closeness, as she believed, to death. As Ralph Houlbrooke notes, ‘women for their part had certain exceptional opportunities on the death-bed. Forbidden to speak in church, they might now utter prayers, exhortations and statements of faith which were heard with a special respect’. Near-death experiences, it was held, caused believers to become closer to God.

Carey’s dedication of the work to teaching and advising her husband also shows her to be subverting the usual relationship between the body and the soul. Through the voice of the Soul she advises and comforts the Body, but she also implies that her husband takes the place of the less dominant entity. Where male-authored writings explored the relationship between the soul and body, they often associated the fleshly, sinful body with femininity. As Roy Porter observes, the dialogues between body and soul were clearly gendered: ‘typically, the body was identified with sensual Eve

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8 The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, 1648, p. 24.
and the soul, or reason, with Adam’.\textsuperscript{10} The subordinate female body would tempt the immortal soul, whilst the dominant rational soul was in danger of submitting to fleshly desires. The Anglican preacher Jeremy Taylor likened this relationship to that of husband and wife:

The Dominion of a man over his Wife is no other than as the Soul rules the Body…. For then the Soul and Body makes a perfect Man, when the Soul commands wisely, or rules lovingly, and cares profitably and provides plentifully, and conducts charitably that body which is its partner, and yet the inferior. But if the Body shall give Laws, and by the violence of the appetite first abuse the Understanding, and then possess the superior portion of the Will and Choice, the body and the soul are not apt company, and the man is a fool and miserable.\textsuperscript{11}

Here, a good relationship between body and soul is related to a successful marriage, following the words of St. Paul in Ephesians 5:22-29, especially 5:23: ‘For the Husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body’. Carey’s presentation of her Soul and Body is in accordance with Taylor’s description of a ‘perfect Man’, where the Soul ‘conducts charitably that body which is its partner, and yet the inferior’. However, she clearly positions herself as the Soul in her dialogue, which gives voice to her stable spiritual self, whereas her body is the entity under tutelage. Though Body voices Carey’s own doubts, the dedication to her husband also has the effect of positioning him as the Body receiving advice and tuition. The use of the Soul as a mouthpiece for her godly views certainly testified to Carey’s godliness, and emphasised that women were not solely sinful, fleshly beings.

**Bodily Affliction and Conversion**

Carey’s positioning of her husband in the role of the Body also associates him with her earthly experiences, particularly the loss of several of their children soon after they were born. These experiences of child loss were documented by the couple in short poems of consolation, attributing their loss to God’s providence. The death of their fourth child, Robert Payler, with whom Carey was pregnant while writing her conversion narrative, provoked both parents to compose poems in couplets of twelve lines in a plain style of grief and submission. George Payler’s poem is addressed to his wife, while urging them both to submit themselves to God’s providence in a similar way to the voice of Carey’s Soul:\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{quote}
Deare Wife, let’s learn to get that Skill,  
Of free Submission to God’s holy Will:  
… ‘tis no matter what:  
If by such Changes, God shall bring us in  
To love Christ Jesus, & to loath our Sin. (95r)
\end{quote}

Carey’s poem, on the other hand, is addressed wholly to God, and, as Pamela Hammons has noted (comparing the poem to Milton’s ‘On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough’), Carey’s voice takes a ‘much more active role’ rather than the straightforward

\textsuperscript{12} Payler’s poem is entitled ’Written by my deare Husband at y’ Death of our 4\textsuperscript{th} (at that time) only child, Robert Payler’, and Carey’s was, ’Written by me at ye same time on ye Death of my 4\textsuperscript{th}, & only Child, Robert Payler’.  

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‘Submission to God’s holy Will’ that her husband advises:13

My all; that Mercy hath made mine
Freely’s surrendred to be thine:
But if I give my All to thee
Let me not pine for Poverty:
Change wth me; do, as I have done,
Give me thy All, even thy deare Son. (95v)

Carey acknowledges the depth of her loss as ‘surrendering’ her ‘all’ to God, whose ‘Mercy’ had allowed her to give birth and enjoy the child for a short time. However, in return for her son, she asks God to ‘Change’ with her his only ‘deare Son’, Jesus Christ, actively urging him to ‘do, as I have done’, and ‘Give me thy All’. By this exchange, Carey is also urging God to change her inwardly, further purging and cleansing her from sin by both physical and spiritual means. As a mother, she is shown to understand and experience God’s providence in a different sensory capacity to her husband: by repeatedly giving birth to children who do not live long, Carey begins to attribute this to God’s repeated purgation of her sinful body. Rather than experience a moment of conversion that Puritan believers often called a ‘new birth’, a regeneration of their souls and bodies, Carey’s process of conversion involves a series of unsuccessful births, though later followed in 1652/3 and 1654/5 by the birth of two children who lived to adulthood, Bethia and Nathaniel.

Carey’s conversion narrative, written after the deaths of three of her children, is framed using several episodes where bodily affliction given her by God encouraged the development of her spiritual life and the process of conversion. After reciting the answers to her catechism, Soul is asked by Body how she is ‘sensible’ of Original Sin (mentioned in the catechism), and of the ‘Meanes God shewed thee to get out of it’, ‘how God dealt wth thee’, and ‘what case thou art now in’ (13v). Soul proceeds to recount Carey’s conversion narrative as proof of her spiritual credentials. God’s work began when she was eighteen years old, ‘in ye midst of my Jollity’, when it was ‘y Lords pleasure to smite me wth a sore sickness’ (14r) which she believed, at the time, would kill her. She perceived that this sickness was to bring her to apprehend God, instead of spending her time in ‘Carding, Dice, Dancing, Masquing, Dressing, vaine Company, going to Playes, [and] following Fashions’ (14r). On recovery, Carey ‘quit’ her vain companions and enquired after God, thanking him that she then fell under a ‘powerfull Ministery’ (15v). However, this minister’s preaching convinced her that she was destined for hell, and Satan was ‘let loose’ (16r) upon her, leading her to refuse any more food and water than she needed to keep alive. She continued in this condition for almost a year, and was comforted by others in similar conditions, but eventually ‘y sweet Time came, that God did declare his free Grace, his abundant Love to me, in y Gift of y Treasure of Heaven, & Earth, Jesus Christ, he set himself so forth to my Apprehension both by his Word, & Spirit’ (18r). Body replies expressing thanks for this ‘strange’ process, giving thanks that God ‘should smite me wth a Sicknesse, when we were in such a dangerous Course’ (24v). Affliction, here, is figured as part of the path to spiritual health, and Body goes on to thank God for this and other material mercies he had shown her.

Carey’s conversion narrative focuses on moments of physical affliction that marked turning points in her spiritual journey. Her original calling to God was signified by a providential sickness, her belief that Christ had died for her redemption followed an attack by Satan that caused her to refuse food, and her labours in childbirth were understood as God purging her from all sin, continuing the process of sanctification. Throughout their lives, seventeenth century believers often continued to experience the burden of sin, as well as doubts about the validity of their faith and election, in being tempted to over-value ‘fleshy’ things, whether they were loved ones, possessions, wealth, or food, drink, and other sensual pleasures. Belief in these chastisements could lead to periods of melancholia and despair if they were interpreted as signs of damnation, but, interpreted as God gradually removing their sins, believers could find strength to overcome their trials. As Jeremy Schmidt has written, ‘despair was actively cultured as a token of God’s favor and as something of a spiritual exercise ... paradoxically linking hope to the substance and feeling of despair itself’.14

For instance, Carey’s second poem, written on the death of her fifth child, Peregrine, depicts her son as a ‘Love-Token’ (96r) that she has presented to God as proof of her devotion to him. Hope, here, finds its place in despair, as Carey indicates that she is exchanging her own dear son for a closer relationship with Christ. Whereas her written ‘Dialogue’, figured by her as a ‘poore mite’, was addressed to her husband, her poetry places God in the role of recipient of her poor child. Both her writings and children become offerings of devotion to her husband and her God. In Carey’s ‘Dialogue’, Body also voices the temptation to despair over the loss of a child (her third child):

Body: Deare Sister, the Lord hath taken from me a Son, a beloved Son, an onely Son, an onely Child, the last of three, and it must needs affect me; Can a Woman forget her sucking Child? that she should not have Compassion on the Son of her Womb; Isaiah 49:15. And will there not be mourning for an onely son; Zechariah 12:10...

Soule: First, For the removal of the Child, know that it is Gods Will, to which submit not one Word; and doe not onely yield, but approve; God is wise, and knows it best; God is loving; and therefore did it; I am sure In faithfullnesse hath the Lord afflicted me; Psalms 119:75. (7r-v)

This dialogue indicates that, while pregnant with her fourth child, Carey was still grieving for her other lost children. Soul, though, advises that God loves her, and ‘therefore did it’. In the margin, she writes that ‘the apprehension of love produceth patience’: the knowledge that God loves her gives her hope in her despair. However, Body’s argument is also figured as deliberately flawed, as she takes scriptural references out of context. For example, she leaves out the latter part of Isaiah 49:15 which suggests that even a nursing mother might forget her child, whereas God would never neglect his people: ‘yea they may forget, yet will I not forget thee’. This is intended to show that even the strongest, most powerful love imaginable (a mother’s for her child) pales in comparison with God’s eternal love and affection. Also, Zechariah 12:10 is a prophecy of Christ’s death, God’s ‘onely son’, already implying that a mother should be willing to exchange or sacrifice her only son as God has set the precedent. Deliberately, it seems, Body’s suffering is undermined by the scriptural arguments it uses, submitting

to the power of God’s love without the need for a conventional reprimand from Soul, who comforts and advises instead. Carey, here, exemplifies the type of introspection that was thought to be necessary to spiritual health, re-evaluating her experiences at times of conflict. Experiencing this inward struggle signified, for her, that she was spiritually regenerate.

These possible interpretations of affliction go some way to explaining the proliferation of conversion narratives like Carey’s, as believers sought to interpret their traumatic experiences as part of a healthy spiritual life. The prophetess Elizabeth Avery’s narrative, published in the same year as Carey addressed her ‘Dialogue’ to her husband, 1653, is also remarkable in its interpretation of this kind of intense suffering. It was included by the Fifth Monarchist John Rogers in his collection of believers’ experiences recorded when they entered his Independent church in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, and contains Avery’s account of her conversion that began at the age of sixteen. Like Carey, Avery struggled with the lack of preaching ministers in the area where she lived, a state of affairs that appears to have continued until she joined Rogers’s congregation. Although she experienced the ‘Free-grace’ of God, she also felt his ‘rod … laid heavy’ upon her with the loss of three of her children in rapid succession. She describes one particular incident when friends gathered at her house during the serious illness of the third of these children, when she writes ‘my Husband came and told me my childe was dying; at which I was left in an horror [Genesis 15:12], as if I were in Hell, none could comfort me, nothing could satisfy me’ (p. 403). In order to try to gain some comfort, she proceeded to converse with a minister who satisfied her with a letter he had received. She then understood the reason that God had punished her, and afterwards thought she ‘was content to part with all, and to let all go’ (p. 403). After that she tells us, ‘God tryed me, and took away another childe from me, […] I could bear it very well, and was not troubled, but rather did rejoice within me to be thus tryed’ (p. 403). That she could rejoice rather than grieve for the death of her child is a remarkable resolution but one not uncommon in the scheme of narratives like these. In the depths of her torments, where she had ‘no comfort, nor ease, nor could I eat or drink’, she came to the conclusion: ‘here was all the comfort that was left me, and it was my Heaven in my Hell, that God would be glorified by my destruction’ (p. 405). She found comfort in knowing that her sufferings, warranted by her sins or not, would glorify God. Later, Avery described how she ‘heard a voice say’ (p. 406) that she would see no more sorrow, but she struggled to find an explanation for the trials that she was yet to face. In the end she came to the understanding that Christ was purging her of her sins:

Yet I was struck in the flesh again, which I wonder at; and then I heard the voice again say, It was sin that was suffering in me, and the flesh as the punishment of sin; and so I found it was, for the destruction of the flesh; and ever after that I found Christ in me, ruling and reigning, and taking all power to himself, and he hath caught [taken] the man-childe up to God, which I brought forth. i.e. The flesh, (by his incarnation) and I have found in me (and do yet) his judgement-seat sit, to judge and sentence sin, and lust, and corruption. (p. 406)

Avery’s resolution that her newborn child’s death was due to Christ judging and then purging her of the sins of the flesh is remarkable. Like Carey, she attributes her pains to punishments for the sins of the flesh, and the taking away of her son is the most effective way that Christ has sentenced her corruptions. This is an example of how

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16 John Rogers, Ohel or Beth-shemesh, A Tabernacle for the Sun, 1653, p. 403.
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sufferings could be understood as part of God’s providence, and how they could be explained as proof to the believer that they were among God’s elect.

The most powerful exploration of God’s ‘destruction of the flesh’ in Carey’s work is her last and longest poem of 46 numbered couplets, ‘Upon the Sight of my abortive Birth the 31st of December 1657’. The poem was written after she had miscarried a child, soon after the birth of her two healthy children, and shows clearly the physicality of affliction on her maternal body interpreted as purgation of sin. Carey describes the child as ‘void of life, & feature’ (114r), or form, suggesting that the child had been born dead before it could develop limbs or, possibly, that its body had developed but was deformed. According to early modern medical thinking, miscarriages were thought to occur because the embryo had not developed properly, causing, as the seventeenth century physician Nicholas Culpeper wrote, ‘the exclusion of a child, not perfect nor living, before legitimate time’. Since Carey’s abortive birth was ‘featureless’ it is possible that hers was a very early miscarriage, and her poem interprets its appearance as a reflection of her own spiritual state. A characteristic of seventeenth century child loss poetry was the expression of belief that an unhealthy, deformed, or dead child was given by God as a punishment for the sins of the parents, and particularly the mother. As Pamela Hammons writes, the ‘spiritual, and moral shortcoming of mothers were believed capable of replication in their offspring’s bodies’; the mother’s spiritual state could be mirrored by her child’s physical appearance. This draws on popular medical belief in the maternal imagination, by which the emotions of the mother during the formation of a foetus could affect its appearance. The midwife Jane Sharp described this belief in her midwifery manual:

The child in the Mother’s womb hath a soul of its own, yet it is a part of the mother until she be delivered, as a branch is part of a Tree while it grows there, and so the mother’s imagination makes an impression upon the child, but it must be a strong imagination at that very time when the forming faculty is at work or else it will not do, but since the child takes part of the mother’s life whilst he is in the womb, as the fruit doth of the tree, whatsoever moves the faculties of the mothers soul may do the like in the child.

Mothers, therefore, were held culpable for their children as soon as they were conceived, and such writings show them drawing on these ideas to express their grief and find consolation. Carey’s poem explores her child’s death in this framework, exploring the idea that she had valued her earthly, healthy children too highly and become too complacent in spiritual duties. Therefore, God had sent her an underdeveloped child as a sign that she herself was underdeveloped spiritually, and used this affliction as an act of purgation. Her child is still destined for heaven, as she believes ‘Since’t had a Soule, shall be for ever blest’ (114v), which indicates that although the child may not have had form enough to live, it was still a member of God’s elect, like its mother.

Carey’s miscarriage was understood by her as a necessary chastisement of God in a framework where such affliction was considered necessary to make herself

18 Hammons, ‘Despised Creatures’, 27. See also Dowd, ‘Genealogical Counternarratives in the Writing of Mary Carey’.
spiritually healthy. An Collins, also writing verse in the 1640s and 50s, described the link between chastising and healing in her poem, ‘The Fourth Meditacion’, where God is figured as the ‘mercyfull Physician’:

Perceivest not thy mercyfull Physician
Doth give thee for thy health these strong purgacions ...
So if that thou should’st seem to disregard,
The Chastisements of God, or seek to ward
The same by wayes or meanes impenitent,
How just shall God renew thy punishment:
If physic for our Bodies health be tane,
We hinder not the working of the same,
Strong Physick if it purge not, putrifies,
And more augments then heales our maladies,
And as is sayd, our manifold Temptacions,
Are nothing but thy scouring Purgacions,
Wherein a dram too much, hath not admission,
Confected by so Skilfull a Physician
Who will not have their bitterness abated,
Till thy ill humors be evacuated.21

Collins, here, understands bodily affliction as a health-giving process where ‘ill humors’, or sin, are purged from a believer’s body. Just as a sick person would not attempt to ‘hinder’ the effects of ‘physic’ or medicine in order to do themselves harm, a believer should accept affliction as part of their journey towards entire holiness. Collins, herself, appears from her poetry to have suffered from an illness that caused her to remain housebound.22 Carey’s poem, however, is remarkable in questioning the purpose of her afflictions, while suspecting that she had not shown enough ‘Thankfulness, / And high Esteeme for those I do possesse’ (115r):

I only now desire of my sweet God,
The Reason why he tooke in hand his Rod?
What he doth spy? What is ye thing amisse?
I faine would learne? Whilst I ye Rod do kisse:
Methinkes Iheare God’s Voice, this is ye Sin,
    And Conscience justifies ye same within:
Thou often dost present me with dead Fruit;
Why should not my Returns, thy Present sute:
Dead Duties, Prayers, Praises thou dost bring,
    Affections dead, dead Heart in every thing; ...
Lively, O do’t, thy Mercies are most sweet;
    Chastisements sharpe; & all ye Meanes that’s meet;
Mend now my Child, & lively Fruit bring me;
    So thou advantage’d much by this wilt be;
My dearest Lord, thy Charge, & more is true;
I see’t, am humbled, & for Pardon sue;
In Christ forgive, & henceforth I will be,

21 An Collins, ‘The Fourth Meditacion’, in Divine Songs and Meditacions, 1653, pp. 84-7 (pp. 84-5). Collins remains nearly anonymous. ‘An’ is a not uncommon variation on ‘Ann’ or ‘Anne’, but could also be short for another name, or mean ‘a’ member of the Collins family.
The Glass

What, nothing, Lord; but what thou makest me;
I am naught, have naught, can do naught but sin. (115v-116v, italics added)

Asking God directly why he has punished her by taking ‘in hand his Rod’, he replies (part italicised) berating her for her own ‘deadness’ and inactivity in spiritual duties: God explains that she has presented him with ‘dead Fruit’, so he is repaying her in kind in order to encourage her to subdue her sin. This fruitlessness, God addresses with chastisements so that she will bring forth ‘lively fruit’, both spiritually and perhaps even physically. Carey responds with acceptance, suing for pardon and forgiveness and declaring that she will be ‘nothing’ but what God makes her.

Carey ends the poem by asking God to enable her to be spiritually fruitful, implying also that this will make her physically fruitful, as the two are intertwined:

I’m a branch of the vine, purge me therefore;
Father, more Fruit to bring, then heretofore:
A Plant in God’s house; O that I may be;
More flourishing in Age, a growing Tree:
Let not my hart, (as doth my Womb) miscarry;
But precious Meanes received, let it tarry;
Till it be form’d; of Gospell Shape, & Suite;
My Meanes, my Mercies, & be pleasant Fruit:
In my whole Life; lively doe thou make me:
For thy Praise, & Name’s sake, O quicken me;
Lord I beg quick’ning Grace, that Grace afford;
Quicken mee Lord according to thy word. (117r)

Carey asks that her spiritual fruits be properly formed, according to the ‘Gospell Shape, & Suite’ indicated in scripture, and not left unformed and featureless like the fruit of her womb. Like the ‘branch of the vine’ of John 15:2, she asks to be purged, or pruned, so that later she will bring forth more spiritual fruit and be ‘quickened’. Variations on the word ‘quicken’ appear five times in seven lines towards the end of the poem, indicating the urgency of Carey’s pleas to be made fruitful. By the end of the poem she pleads that the Lord would continue to ‘amend’ and ‘keep’ her heart that he had ‘lifted up’ to himself, echoing the rising of the child’s soul earlier in the poem. The 46 couplets of the poem reflect the on-going process of purging sin from the body in order that Carey rise towards spiritual health, becoming closer to God. It is also likely that each couplet represents a year of her life, given that her meditations (written shortly before this poem) indicate that she was 45 years old: as An Collins wrote about this process, ‘So have the faithfull imperfections some, / Till to a perfect age in Christ they come’.23

Mary Carey’s manuscript conversion narrative demonstrates her piety and her dedication to teaching and improving the godliness of her family, particularly her husband. She vindicates women from their usual cultural position as the more sinful and fleshly of the two sexes by adopting the role of the Soul in her dialogue, and directly addressing God in her poems. What is particularly remarkable, though, is Carey’s interpretation of her afflictions as health-giving, gradually purging her of sin through the process of continual sanctification. Towards the end of the part of conversion narrative entitled ‘A Meditation’, Carey writes about her afflictions with hindsight, declaring to Satan her willingness to have undergone the loss of her children:

THE GLASS

What’s that farther, Sathan, I wanted ye Life of my Children, w’th I importunately begged; I answer thee, When I importunately begged their Life, I knew not but God’s Will might be to spare as well as to take; & when I more clearely saw it God’s Will to remove them; I wanted not a Heart (of God’s giving) willingly to surrender them, nor did I want ye Comfort of them after they were gone, for God gave me more then he tooke from me; more Enjoyment of God for some of ye Creature is a sweet Change. (102v-103r)

It is remarkable that Carey writes that the exchange of her children for ‘more Enjoyment of God’ is sweet, and that she puts in Satan’s mouth that she ‘begged’ for the life of her children and grieved for them. This is what we might think of now as perfectly understandable behaviour, and yet it is voiced by Satan. Carey, however, believes in the absolute sovereignty of God and strives to accept his providence as the work of a physician, gradually refining and purging her. Drawing on the specifically female physical experiences of childbirth and miscarriage, Carey interprets her conversion in a gendered way, emphasising the vividness of her spiritual regeneration. The extent of her physical affliction supports her spiritual credentials.
Notes on Contributors

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Having obtained his PhD from Kings College London in 2005, Dr Bill Goldman took up an offer to teach in universities in China, staying for three years. Living now in Richmond and tutoring privately, he is working on the book of his doctoral thesis, to be entitled Prophetic History: Blake, Browning & the Visionary Tradition.

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Dr Roger Kojecký’s T S Eliot’s Social Criticism describes Eliot’s attempts to engage as a Christian man of letters with social issues. The book contains first publication of a paper on the role of the clerisy contributed by Eliot to the proceedings of a discussion group, The Moot. He is among the contributors to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (IVP), and has lectured recently at universities in Krakow, Olomouc, Toronto and Beijing. He is Secretary of the Christian Literary Studies Group.

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