

The Experience of Warfare in the Long Seventeenth-Century: Narrating Body and Personhood in European Self-Narrative Documents

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The early modern body carried clout. Pregnant women of all social rank could demand food and special treatment,¹ whilst noblewomen could use bouts of melancholia to manipulate their relatives into visiting them or to cater to their will in other ways.² Corporal punishment was not merely a barbaric habit of the age, but it aimed to purge not only the body of the perpetrator, but the entire community from wrongdoing. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the body lost some of its – at times unpredictable – agency, and it came to be redefined as an object that might be controlled if only it were described and analysed sufficiently and under the consultation of experts.³ This change was intertwined with a shift in the way the body could be narrated. Most strikingly, it now became possible to write about one's own body with some form of detachment. Why did this happen and how? These questions were originally formulated by Michel Foucault and they have stimulated extraordinary amounts of research and theoretical writings that have fertilised debates in history as well as sociology, philosophy, and literary studies, to name but a few disciplines. A majority of the explanations which have sought to resolve this broad problem have, at their core, relied on a top-down view of society. As one of the most established historical narratives explains, medical professionals gained in confidence as a social group, and as a result they changed and influenced the discourses giving shape to the body in the first place. The present enquiry seeks to complicate these narratives. It investigates the role pre-modern embodied subjectivities played in this development: What opportunities did early modern conceptions of the body offer the self-narrator? Did these flexible bodily constructs prove challenging to fledgling state-power? The present study will analyse self-narrative documents written in the transcultural context of warfare in the pursuit of this line of questioning.

Debates about the history of the body and subjectivity have long been intertwined. In France, the work by Michel Foucault, Michael Mauss, and Pierre Bourdieu has led to an early interest in the sociological construction of the body and the individual, and today this is carried forward by cultural historians with particular interests in the discursive formations of the body.⁴ The power politics of discourse have been a key interest in the French debates, but it has also proven fruitful to consider the category of bodily experience. Barbara Duden's pioneering analysis of the records of an eighteenth-century physician has shown that the early modern body functioned so differently that we must beware of any attempts to reconstruct

¹ See Ulinka Rublack, 'Pregnancy, childbirth and the female body in early modern Germany', *Past & Present*, 150 (February 1996), pp. 84–110, here esp. pp. 88f, 104–6.

² See Magdalena S. Sánchez, 'Melancholy and female illness', *Journal of Women's History*, 8 (Summer 1996), pp. 81–102.

³ Of course, this redefinition remained partial at best and bodies that behave in 'abnormal' ways continue to be perceived as deeply subversive even in contemporary society, but nevertheless we can conclude that a majority of bodies came to be increasingly redefined as closed-off units that were given labels and categories, which ultimately rendered them less threatening.

⁴ See for instance Georges Vigarello (ed.), *Histoire du corps. De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, (Paris, 2005); Stanis Perez, *La santé de Louis XIV une biohistoire du Roi-Soleil*, (Paris, 2010).

past experiences using our own knowledge of the body.⁵ Her findings on the relative openness of female bodies, whose skin she describes as more of a connective membrane to the outside world than as an impervious barrier, remain influential to this day. Confirming and building on this finding, Ulinka Rublack has directed our attention to the close connection between bodily health and social interaction in the early modern period. The active pursuit of friendship was key because the bodily reactions associated with friendly conversation were believed to help to overcome blockages of the internal organs.⁶ Michael Stolberg, too, has demonstrated the influence of cultural shifts on the experience of the body and of illness in particular.⁷ His impressive study of patient letters has shown how the experience of illness was deeply connected to the concepts of medicine and bodily constitution that were dominant at a specific time and place.

Gudrun Piller has worked extensively with German self-narratives of the eighteenth century and found that they reveal that health maintenance practices and efforts of bodily control increasingly became a part of a moralising bourgeois habitus.⁸ For Piller, histories of the body building on self-narrative sources are always studies of discourse.⁹ While it is here neither possible nor useful to open up the entirety of the debate around whether the early modern body can be viewed as ‘dissolving fully into language’,¹⁰ it has to be noted that historians working with older sources in particular have pushed against this view in the past. Lyndal Roper has prominently called for ‘a history that can problematize the relation between the psychic and the physical’.¹¹ Whilst her usage of psychoanalysis in historical enquiry is contested, the problem she refers to remains highly topical. Most recently, Sundar Henny has presented sophisticated arguments about the import early modern self-narrators placed on the materiality of their texts, which at times could be understood as extensions of the author’s body.¹² In French research on self-narratives, the arguments by Barras and Rieder postulating the concept of a ‘corps subjectif’ have been influential.¹³ They argue that in the

⁵ Barbara Duden, *Geschichte unter der Haut: ein Eisenacher Arzt und seine Patientinnen um 1730*, (Stuttgart, 1987).

⁶ See for instance Ulinka Rublack, 'Fluxes: the early modern body and the emotions', transl. by P. Selwyn, *History Workshop Journal*, 53:1 (2002), and Augustin Güntzer, *Kleines Biechlin von meinem ganzen Leben. Die Autobiographie eines Elsässer Kannengiessers aus dem 17. Jahrhundert*, F. Brändle and D. Sieber (eds.), (Basel and Cologne, 2002), fol. 46 v., 'Aber ich sahe, daz mein Gepliedt durch die Einsamkeit nicht gereiniget wirdt, sondter nuhr dadurch dick schwarz wirdt, darvon mihr gross Traurigkeit, Angst undt Schroecken entstehett. Mache mich derohalben mit den jungen Gesellen lustig in Ehren, darmit die Melancoley undt grosse Traurigkeit zu vergessen, so sich etwass gebessert hatt.'

⁷ See Michael Stolberg, *Homo patiens: Krankheits- und Körpererfahrung in der Frühen Neuzeit*, (Köln, 2003); Michael Stolberg, 'Der gesunde Leib: Zur Geschichtlichkeit frühneuzeitlicher Körpererfahrung' in Paul Münch, (ed.), *Erfahrung' als Kategorie der Frühnezeitgeschichte*, (München, 2001) pp. 37–58, pp. 37–57.

⁸ Gudrun Piller, *Private Körper: Spuren des Leibes in Selbstzeugnissen des 18. Jahrhunderts*, (Köln, 2007), see for instance pp. 200-3.

⁹ Gudrun Piller, 'Private body - what do self-narratives bring to the history of the body?', in Claudia Ulbrich, Kaspar von Greyerz, and Lorenz Heiligensetzer, (eds.), *Mapping the 'I': research on self-narratives in Germany and Switzerland* (Leiden ; Boston, 2015) pp. 76–96, here esp. pp. 94f.

¹⁰ As it is put in the seminal article Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Why all the fuss about the body? A medievalist's perspective', *Critical Inquiry*, 22 (Autumn 1995), pp. 1-33, here p. 21.

¹¹ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe*, (London, 1994), p. 21.

¹² Sundar Henny, *Vom Leib geschrieben: Der Mikrokosmos Zürich und seine Selbstzeugnisse im 17. Jahrhundert*, (Köln, 2016).

¹³ Vincent Barras and Philip Rieder, 'Corps et subjectivité à l'époque des Lumières', *Dix-huitième Siècle*, 37 (2005), pp. 211–223.

Enlightenment period patients claimed ultimate authority over their illnesses, since they had the best knowledge of their family history and their bodily constitution. Barras and Rieder proposed that it was not until the nineteenth century that patients began to truly accept the authority of physicians.

The proposed project will break new ground in these debates in two ways. Firstly, it will be useful to extend discussions of bodies and subjectivities beyond considerations of illness and sexuality. Warfare offers an interesting test case. War affected huge swathes of the early modern population, yet we must assume that experiences varied greatly between different social groups; for a soldier, fighting on the battlefield was an undeniably bodily experience,¹⁴ but whilst aristocratic women may not have taken part in the actual fighting themselves, they certainly did not remain unaffected by the myriad forms of violence these conflicts unleashed. Working with documents that do not have an explicit interest in pathologising the experience of the narrator (as do, for instance, patient letters) allows us to ask new questions: did comparable experiences of war create common discursive patterns? Can we glean processes of subjectivity in the way self-narrators chose to deal with the impact of warfare in their texts? What effects did the contests of power engaged in by fledgling states, communities and persons have on embodied concepts of early modern personhood *and vice versa*?

Secondly, the comparative discussion of self-narratives from English, German, and French speaking territories of early modern Europe is as yet unprecedented, but necessary in order to allow for the transcultural character of warfare itself. The seminal volume on the popular experience of the Thirty Years' War edited by Benigna von Krusenstjern and Hans Medick laid groundwork for this. Its contributors drew on Danish and Swedish alongside German sources, but these contributions were individual chapters, and a transcultural approach to experiences of warfare in self-narrative documents remains a gap in the research.¹⁵

My approach to the sources will draw on the conceptual work pioneered by Claudia Ulbrich and Gabriele Jancke, who have argued that in the framework of early modern self-narrative research it makes sense to abandon the term 'individual' in favour of the less encumbered 'person'. They suggest that we begin by identifying other concepts of personhood than that of 'individualism' in order to learn about the 'relational personhood' of the authors rather than about their more or less fully formed selves.¹⁶ The project will build on and extend this methodology through the addition of the notion of embodiment to the discussion. Caroline Walker Bynum is forceful in pointing out that the average pre-modern person did not differentiate between the body, identity, and even their soul.¹⁷ When speaking of 'concepts of personhood' we must thus always remember that this is a construction that would not be

¹⁴ See Martin Dinges, 'Soldatenkörper in der Frühen Neuzeit. Erfahrungen mit einem unzureichend geschützten, formierten und verletzten Körper in Selbstzeugnissen', in Richard van Dülmen, (ed.), *Körper-Geschichten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996) pp. 71–98.

¹⁵ See Benigna von Krusenstjern, Hans Medick, (eds.), *Zwischen Alltag und Katastrophe der Dreissigjährige Krieg aus der Nähe*, (Göttingen, 1999).

¹⁶ Gabriele Jancke and Claudia Ulbrich, *Vom Individuum zur Person: neue Konzepte im Spannungsfeld von Autobiographietheorie und Selbstzeugnisforschung*, (Göttingen, 2005).

¹⁷ Walker Bynum, 'Why all the fuss about the body?', esp. p. 8, yet Walker Bynum continued to show in the article that there were highly sophisticated medieval thinkers who posed questions regarding the body and identity that did not differ all that radically from modern discussions.

recognised by the historical actors we study, and in order to account for this, I argue that we must find ways to reinsert the body to the discussion.

For instance, Augustin Gützer, the Alsace pewterer who wrote a fascinating autobiography spanning the duration of the Thirty Years' War, opened his text with references to his bodily constitution: 'almighty lord, I see that I was born to suffer, already on the day of my birth I had a fracture and I suffered many illnesses in my tender childhood.'¹⁸ The war is present in his narrative in the background since he retold the hardships of having to house soldiers, and the religious discrimination he faced because of his steadfast Calvinism, but his personal suffering was a far stronger current throughout the text.¹⁹ His written account has been read as an attempt to make sense of his misfortune, as well as an apology to his offspring to whom he left next to nothing after his death.²⁰ The war would be an obvious strategy to explain his socio-economic decline, and while he did make reference to it, the detailed descriptions of his bodily ailments were utilised at least to an equal extent in order to explain his misfortune. I argue that we can usefully extend our interpretation of the aims of his text by reading his insistence on his illnesses and injuries as a way to claim his narrative more firmly as his own. Gützer does not tell the story of another life that had fallen casualty to the war efforts of powers far greater than himself, but instead he worked with bodily images to give the impression of a struggle in which his entire person – body and soul – was engaged continuously.

Alice Thornton, an English gentlewoman born in 1626/7, wrote an autobiography spanning the English Civil War and the Protectorate (1642-1660). Whilst much of her narrative focused on family events and domesticity, she also found creative ways to express her opinions and involvements in the divisive political situation in England. Thornton's mother died in 1659, a year before the Restoration of Charles II. In the autobiography the account of this death followed the contemporary *ars moriendi* discourse. The elderly woman remained coherent on her deathbed, willing to accept her fate, and she prayed until the last possible moment. Alice recorded that her mother stated:

that if we humbled our selves for the abominable sins of this nation, [...] God would returne in mercy and restore His decaied church in England, and His servant's son, blessed King Charles the First's posterity, to rule in this nation.²¹

Modern concepts of the body are no longer flexible enough to plausibly accommodate such a sudden bout of clarity and prediction in a dying elderly person, but in Alice's narrative her mother's liminal state between life and death makes such a statement possible. It created a

¹⁸ Gützer, *Kleines Biechlin von Meinem Gantzen Leben*, fol. 9r, 'Almichtiger Gorr, ich siee, daß ich zu Leidten bin gebohren, gleich mit mihr auff diße Welt einen Proch pracht vndt vil Kranckheiten in meiner zarter Kindth[e]it angestanden haben, welches ich von meinen Eltern vernam.'

¹⁹ For instance, he wrote about a particularly intense toothache he suffered in 1648, see Gützer, *Kleines Biechlin*, fol. 194 r: 'ich glaube nicht, das ein Mensch gro^essern Schmerzen erlitten hatt an den Zenen dan ich. In dem Schmerzen lieff ich herumb als wie ein unsiniger Mensch. Ja, ich musste schreyen undt wintzeln, ja, ich vermeindte, ich werde die Wendt hinauff miessen lauffen.'

²⁰ See Fabian Brändle, 'Gemeiner Mann, was nun? Autobiographie und Lebenswelt des Augustin Gützer' in Augustin Gützer, *Kleines Biechlin von meinem ganzen Leben. Die Autobiographie eines Elsässer Kannengiessers aus dem 17. Jahrhundert*, F. Brändle and D. Sieber (eds.), (Basel and Cologne, 2002), pp. 3-27.

²¹ Alice Thornton *The autobiography of Alice Thornton, of East Newton, co. York*, C. Jackson (ed.), (Durham, 1875), p. 110.

powerful narrative memory that would not have failed to impress Thornton's offspring, for whom she wrote her text. Alice's relation of the experience of national conflict was thus not confined to a detached observation, but rather it encompassed her and her family's personal involvement in the war and its repercussions, to the extent that the politics of the realm resonated in her mother's death chamber.

This study proposes to analyse a wide-ranging sample of English, German, and French self-narrative documents, whose authors share the experience of warfare. Emphasis will be placed on the inclusion of male and female authors of variable social backgrounds. The military conflicts that will be considered include the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the English Civil War (1642-1651), and possibly the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), should this prove to be fruitful. Such a transcultural approach to self-narrative writing is now possible because of numerous online databases that identify and at times even digitise self-narratives from the areas of interest to this study.²² These projects provide the unprecedented opportunity to build a suitable corpus of sources for a project of this scope out of documents that are notoriously difficult to find through primary archival research. My strong language and palaeographical skills, archival experience, and deep understanding of the varied theoretical approaches to this type of research, distinguish me as the ideal researcher to carry out this work .

This project will interrogate the role of early modern embodied subjectivities in the formation of the modern body. English, French, and (Swiss-) German self-narrative documents written in the context of warfare of the long seventeenth century will be analysed with a particular view to how they engage (or fail to engage) with the violent upheavals of their time. The goal is to make a contribution to a bottom-up history of the redefinition of pre-modern bodies and personhood through the provision of a more nuanced view of the social and cultural foundations of this shift. Moreover, the transcultural thrust of this project will allow for a reconsideration of the chronologies that situate this change in the late eighteenth century, which have so far been largely built on French source material. The project further offers explanatory potential that is not confined to the field of early modern history, but that extends to sociological considerations of processes of state-formation and civilisation, to gendered

²² For Swiss documents see the project led by Kaspar von Greyerz, *Schweizerische Selbstzeugnis-Datenbank*: <<http://wp.unil.ch/egodocuments/de/>>, last accessed 25/09/17; for Germany see Gabriele Jancke, *Selbstzeugnisse im deutschsprachigen Raum. Autobiographien, Tagebücher und andere autobiographische Schriften, 1400-1620*: <<http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/jancke-quellenkunde/index.html>>, last accessed 25/09/17; for France see specifically the recent publications: Jean-Pierre Bardet (ed.), *Les écrits du for privé en Europe (du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine)*, (Pessac, 2010); and Sylvie Mouysset (ed.), *"Car c'est moy que je peins": écritures de soi, individu et liens sociaux: Europe, XVe-XXe siècle*, (Toulouse, 2010); as well as the database: Jean-Pierre Bardet and François-Joseph Ruggiu, *Les écrits du for privé*: <<http://ecritsduforprive.humanum.fr/accueilbase.htm>>, last accessed 25/09/17; for the particularly strong tradition of self-narrative research in the United Kingdom see for instance James S. Amelang, *The flight of Icarus*, (Stanford, Calif, 1998); and Effie Botonaki, *Seventeenth-century English women's autobiographical writings*, (Lewiston, N.Y, 2004), for online collections of self-narratives: Christopher Handley, *The diary research website*, <<http://diarysearch.co.uk/index.html>>, last accessed 25/09/17; also Queen Mary University of London, *Centre for editing lives and letters*: <<http://www.livesandletters.ac.uk/>>, last accessed 25/09/17; In the Netherlands Rudolf Dekker and Arianne Baggerman are leading figures in self-narrative research. See Rudolf Dekker (ed.), *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical writing in its social context since the Middle Ages*, (2002), there is also an online inventory of Dutch self-narrative documents curated by these scholars: <<http://www.egodocument.net/egodocument/index.html>>, last accessed 28/09/17 .

analyses of bodily formation and performativity, and to cultural understandings of violence and conflict. Finally, this project offers the opportunity to redress the histories of warfare and state-power from its excessive focus on state players towards an intensified engagement with popular resistance and collaboration. For all these reasons, I am confident that the proposed project occupies an ideal position to attract financing from European, interdisciplinary funding competitions.