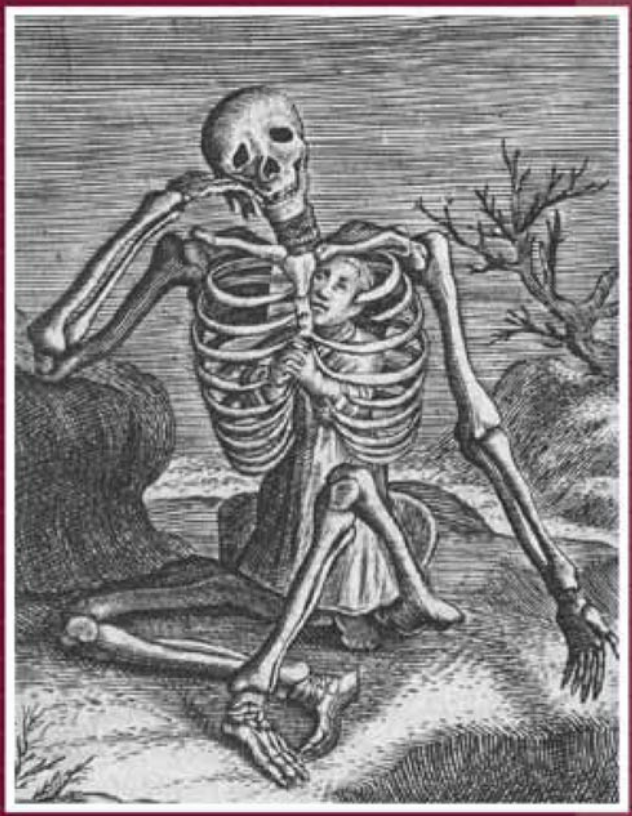
ROUTLEDGE

# Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern England

SARAH E. JOHNSON



WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

# STAGING WOMEN AND THE SOUL-BODY DYNAMIC IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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# Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern England

SARAH E. JOHNSON
*Queen's University, Canada*

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# Contents

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# Note on Texts

I accessed all early books cited in this study through *Early English Books Online* (*EEBO*). I have preserved original spelling and have silently modernized letters (such as the long s, i/j, u/v) and expanded contractions.

All references to the *Oxford English Dictionary* are to the *OED* Online.

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# Introduction
# Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic

## Literary Convention, Literal Consequences

In early modern England, calling into question whether women possessed souls meant calling into question their intelligence, their capacity for reason, their ability to govern their own bodies and passions. It also meant departing from the orthodox Christian belief that men and women were both created in God's image, with an immaterial, immortal component to the self. And yet the idea that women might be soulless circulated as a theological proposition and as a form of academic joke. John Donne even played with this idea in one of his early writings.

The seventh Problem of Donne's *Paradoxes and Problems* is, as its title announces, '*Why hath the common opinion affoorded woemen Soules?*' To solve this riddle, Donne first elaborates on why attributing souls to women is questionable. First, 'wee' – the pronoun signalling a targeted male audience – do not even receive 'any part' of our 'mortall soules of sence or growth' from 'them'.[1] On top of this apparent learned consensus, 'wee dynye soules to others' who 'equall' women in 'all but Speeche', and after all, women owe their speech 'onely to theyr bodily instruments'. Who are these 'others' equal to women? Donne speculates that an ape, goat, fox, or serpent could speak just as well as a woman if they possessed the same mechanisms for speech. So why do men persist in accrediting women with souls? Maybe to avoid displeasing women, since they have 'so many' ways to 'hurt' men. 'Even theyr loving destroyes us', Donne points out. Men therefore 'give them what they will', and when some call women 'Angels' or 'Goddesses', and 'the Peputian Heretikes make them Bishops', men get carried away and 'allow them soules' too. Or perhaps men dignify women in this way only to 'flatter' those princes and 'great personages' who are 'so much governed' by women. Donne piles up these contemptuous examples. Maybe men say women have souls as a means of overlooking their own prodigality: if even a woman possesses a soul, a soul must be 'no greate matter' to concern oneself with. Yet again, men may simply 'lend' women souls for use, since women will give their souls away again, along with their bodies. These answers culminate in the final suggestion that men allow women souls since women 'would come neere' the devil, and the devil, 'who doth most mischeefe', is 'all soule'. In other words, perhaps to repay women for the miseries they cause, men 'have given woemen soules onely to make them capable of damnation'.

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[1] John Donne, 'Why Hath the Common Opinion Affoorded Woemen Soules?', 28–9. All subsequent quotations of this work come from these page numbers.

Donne is careful to prevent the uncontrolled circulation of early writings like this one, entreating Henry Goodyer in a letter to 'let goe no copy of my Problems, till I review them. If it be too late, at least be able to tell me who hath them'.[2] Helen Peters endorses Evelyn Simpson's suggestion that in order to avoid offending those who might help him rehabilitate his career, Donne likely revised certain Problems (namely, 'XVIII on "Women and Feathers"' and 'XII on the "Variety of Green"') that conveyed 'hostility' or 'bitterness' towards women or towards the court.[3] Despite Donne's apparent unease about who might chance to read his Paradoxes or Problems, literary critics of these works have emphasized that if we take their content at face value – if we dwell, for instance, on the blatant misogyny of Problem VII – we are missing the point. Instead, we should notice how Donne's Problems work to parody or criticize the very scholarly practice and literary form they exemplify. We should recognize that they encourage the careful reader to resist their showy rhetoric.[4] Donne himself even calls his Paradoxes, closely related to the Problems in literary form and tradition, mere 'swaggerers' that 'do there [sic] office' if 'they make you to find better reasons against them'.[5]

If we apply to Problem VII this reading of the *Paradoxes and Problems* as exposing the limitations or dangers of stylized rhetorical display, however, we risk brushing aside the fact that the Problem dealing with women's souls flaunts adept skill at the type of rhetorical exercise that it purportedly parodies. Very little in this particular Problem suggests that its main purpose is to warn the reader about the potentially misleading qualities of rhetoric by showing how easily it can be mobilized to develop wrong ideas, such as the doubtfulness of women possessing souls. Instead, in keeping with the classical and university traditions to which the Problem form belongs, the more obvious effect of Problem VII is to entertain the reader through its display of the writer's cleverness – a display that in this case takes place entirely at women's expense. Simpson traces the Problem as an educational tool from its classical origins to its use in early modern England. It was featured in university exercises and annual disputations, and in formal demonstrations of wit and argument when royalty or dignitaries came to visit. Donne's familiarity with the disputation and the Problem would have come from his studies at Oxford and perhaps Cambridge.[6] His letters show that he also participated in the Problem's development 'as a means of social diversion'.[7] Problem VII's male scholar perspective comes through in its firm 'wee' and 'them' division that defines men

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2 John Donne, 'To Sir [Henry Goodyer]', 383–4.

3 Helen Peters (ed.), *Paradoxes and Problems*, xli–xlii. Peters, xv–xvi, dates the Problems between 1603 and 1609 or 1610, 'a gloomy time in Donne's life for he lived in Mitcham with a sickly wife and an increasing family, without any proper means of support'.

4 See, for instance, James Baumlin, *John Donne and the Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse*, 16–17, 65, 242, and Peters, *Paradoxes and Problems*, xl.

5 John Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, 378.

6 Evelyn Simpson, *Prose Works of John Donne*, xxxi.

7 Ibid.

as thinking subjects and women as interpretable material, a division very much in line with the traditional gendering of the rational soul as masculine and the body as feminine. George Parfitt claims that 'as a category women are objects for Donne's wit and of interest only in that respect', and that the focus here is on 'male commonplaces' or 'characteristics men assign to women' and not on a 'real revaluation of Woman'.[8] This distinction between the serious conceptualization of women versus simply the use of women as topic for an exercise in wit is, I think, a false one that, along with the characterization of Donne's Problems as 'clever trifles' produced nonchalantly 'at odd moments in a busy life',[9] dismisses the real cultural impact that the literary circulation of such stereotypes could carry for real women.

The negative stereotypes packed into Problem VII include: women are primarily bodily creatures, akin to animals in their irrationality; the contrary association of women with non-physical figures like angels or goddesses is meaningless flattery; women are of consequence only in their relations to men; and women are prone to losing their souls and jeopardizing men's through their alacrity for bodily lust. As this study will seek to unfold, the treatment of women in much early modern writing, as in Donne's 'Why Hath the Common Opinion Affoorded Woemen Soules?', is inextricable from common understandings of the soul-body divide itself as gendered. I begin with Donne's Problem VII in part because it starts to illustrate how the conventional gendering of the soul-body relationship is at once debilitating and deeply problematic for women, and yet something that risks being overlooked as mere convention, as unimportant because it does not really reflect sincere belief. Surely Donne, the future esteemed dean of St Paul's, would never have seriously entertained the idea that only men possessed souls? And yet, if the speculation that Donne worried about a 'possible patroness' seeing some of his Problems and taking offence does not convince that they are something more than harmless 'trifles', Simpson draws our attention to a telling passage in one of Donne's later sermons that could almost be taken as Donne speaking directly to his younger, Problem-writing self:

> For, howsoever some men out of a petulancy and wantonnesse of wit, and out of the extravagancy of Paradoxes, and such singularities, have called the faculties, and abilities of women in question, even in the roote thereof, in the reasonable and immortall soul, yet that one thing alone [the questioning of whether women possess souls] hath been enough to create a doubt, (almost an assurance in the negative) whether S. *Ambroses* Commentaries upon the Epistles of S. *Paul*, be truly his or no. … No author of gravity, of piety, of conversation in the Scriptures could admit that doubt, whether a woman were created in the Image of God, that is, in possession of a reasonable and immortall soul.[10]

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8 George A.E. Parfitt, *John Donne: A Literary Life*, 32.

9 Simpson, *Prose Works of John Donne*, 132, 148.

10 Ibid., 142.

If an early modern reader of a writing like Donne's Problem VII would inevitably view its misogynistic wit as unconnected to ideas about real women, and if few credited the historical notion that women were soulless, despite this notion's availability for use in rhetorical stances, Donne would not likely have needed to explicitly and publicly address – and firmly denounce – this position as he does here, in a sermon he gave on Easter, 1630. Even earnest rejections of the argument that women lacked souls somehow lend weight to the topic as legitimate and worth consideration to begin with. Regardless of how far Problem VII's cynicism is from Donne's personal belief about women and souls, the question about women's souls, as I discuss in Chapter 2, actually received serious attention in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Indeed, despite Robert Ray's characterization of Donne's Problems as 'usually pseudo-problems, false issues, and largely unexplainable', developed with 'the most outrageous, illogical, and unexpected "reasons" for the sake of entertainment',[11] Problem VII's development is not illogical or unexpected. In the first line Donne cites a consensus that men have not received 'so much from [women] as any part of eyther of our mortall soules of sence or growth' – that is, that not even the lower faculties of the soul (according to the inherited Aristotelian model) came from one's mother. Questions about the soul's origin – whether a child received a soul from the mother, father, from both parents, or directly from God – were certainly not settled in the early modern period as this first line would suggest. In a treatise published more than three decades after the writing of Donne's Problems, for instance, Henry Woolnor, in tackling the question of how one indivisible soul can emerge from two souls, admits that Aristotle's denial 'that females had any seede at all, being onely as the ground wherein seede is sowen' offers an easy answer, 'for then the soule proceeding from the soule of the father onely, there shall not need be two soules, nor one mingled of two'.[12] Woolner ends up rejecting Aristotle's position in favour of a less male-centred view of 'the spirituall seede of the soule' as something that is 'not in the severall seede of either sex … but rather in both when but one' – as something that only comes to exist, in other words, when the souls of two parents 'cleave together … at the instant of conception'.[13] Around the same time, however, William Harvey's influential medical writings countered this version of generation. As Eve Keller has shown, Harvey credited male semen exclusively as the 'spark of life' and represented it as possessing 'divinity' in contrast to the female, who served merely as a passive 'incubator' for the foetus.[14] This debate into the 1640s about whether or not women shared with men the role of communicating a soul to their offspring indicates how Donne's academic joke is not detached from real questions and concerns that had serious repercussions for cultural perceptions of women.

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[11] Robert H. Ray, *John Donne Companion*, 191.

[12] Henry Woolnor, *True Originall of the Soule*, 110–11. Page numbers should be 210–11, but the page number after 208 reads 109, and the subsequent pages count from 109.

[13] Ibid., 111–13.

[14] Eve Keller, *Generating Bodies and Gendered Selves*, 112–19.

In other words, separating the soul-body dynamic as a literary convention or motif from more literal considerations of this relationship would amount to a false distinction, I think, akin to attempting to distinguish between the use of 'women' as a topic or prop for rhetorical exercise and genuine attitudes towards women. In the following chapters, then, I work from the premise that literary and dramatic representations of women were deeply connected to the possibilities that real women could see for themselves and to the cultural attitudes they faced on a daily basis. This study is, nonetheless, literary in focus and concentrates on dramatic treatments of the soul-body dynamic as it underlies and inflects representations of women. I do not attempt to chronicle evidence of how real women might have received and responded to the texts I examine, nor do I survey or analyze the vast and complex corpus of early modern philosophical, theological, devotional, and anatomical[15] writings on the soul-body relationship, although an awareness of these discourses necessarily informs my readings of the plays and masques that I consider. This study is more concerned with how the pervasive early modern mode of gendering and hierarchizing the soul in relation to the body is at the heart of many negative or disempowering representations of women and justifications of women's supposedly inherent inferiority to men. But if the conventional gendering of the soul-body hierarchy served as a patriarchal tool for women's subordination (as it explicitly did), it carries equal potential to promote empowering ideas of women. Precisely because of its pervasiveness, its familiarity, this in many ways oppressive construct, I argue, also provides an effective tool for reconceptualizations of gender relations, in that variations on the dominant version of the body-soul relationship would be recognizable and loaded with meaning in their departure from the well-known standard. This book aims to demonstrate how a critical sensitivity to the full complexity of a dramatic text's engagement with understandings of the soul-body, or immaterial-material dynamic can suggest new, and often more flexible and positive, readings of its representations of women – readings available to early modern audiences that we should not overlook.

## A Word on Terms

Throughout this study I use the terms 'soul', 'spirit', 'mind', 'intellect', 'reason', and 'immaterial' somewhat interchangeably, as with the opposing terms 'body', 'flesh', 'matter', and 'material'. These terms indeed overlap and were often conflated in the language of early modern writers. So, while we must be aware of how 'spirit' could designate a specific kind of bridge between body and soul, 'a subtle and thin body always movable, engendered of blood and vapour, and the

[15] Johnathan Pope, 'Anatomy of the Soul', has exposed a lack of critical attention to how early modern anatomical works were concerned with the soul as well as with the body and contributed to, or reflected, the shaping of early modern subjectivity, as unstable and elusive as that subjectivity is to define.

vehicle or carriage of the faculties of the soul',[16] my usage reflects how, alongside this definition, 'spirit' could also simply be another word for 'soul'. John Davies's long poem *Nosce Teipsum* (1599), for example, claims that '*The Soul a Substance* and a *Spirit* is', a '*spirit* … / Which from the fountaine of Gods spirit doth flow', and which is 'not like *aire* or *wind*, / Nor like the *spirits* about the *heart* or *braine*' (i.e., the 'spirits' of physiological discourse).[17] Davies also calls the soul 'a *spirit* and *immateriall mind*'.[18] Simon Harward's *Discourse Concerning the Soule and Spirit of Man* (1604) opens Chapter 1 with the subheading '*How many wayes the words Soule and Spirit are synonyma*' and proceeds to give several examples, including that both words 'point out' the intellect, that is, the 'rationall soul and understanding spirit'.[19] Some scholars warn that the opposition between spirit and flesh, however, is not always the same as the opposition between soul and body, primarily with reference to the Pauline tension between spirit and flesh as a tension between two different spiritual orientations, the way of the spirit leading towards God and the way of the flesh leading away from God.[20] The Platonic, Augustinian, and Aristotelian divisions of the soul into higher and lower faculties, however,

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[16] Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 3.12.173. William Hill, *Infancie of the Soule*, C3r, cites Hippocrates in his definition of 'Spirit' as the chair and instrument of the soul, noting that the Spirit, taking the forms of vital or lively spirit in the heart, natural spirit in the liver, and animal spirit in the head, joins together body and soul, and when the spirit is weak, the body-soul connection weakens. Gail Kern Paster, 'Nervous Tension', 113, 121, provides a critical assessment of the treatment of 'spirit' in physiological discourse, focusing on Helkiah Crooke. 'As properties animating, even defining the living body', spirits, she points out, 'like soul, eluded the anatomist; but, unlike soul, they mattered to his work because they were thought responsible for some of the body's most important structures of visible and behavioural difference, inside and out'. Paster's exploration of the physiological understanding of spirits leads her to posit that the discourse surrounding spirits 'provides a historically specific rationale for strong, ethically loaded contrasts between paired traits like impulsiveness versus self-containment, spontaneity versus calculation or strategic thinking'.

[17] John Davies, *Nosce Teipsum*, C2v, D3v.

[18] Ibid., E1r.

[19] Simon Harward, *Discourse Concerning the Soule*, B1r, B4r. Harward, 8, also gives an account of the relationship between animal spirits and the soul, with an analogy cited as Galenic that the 'spirit is in respect of the soule, as the sparkle in respect of the fire'. He provides a lucid summary of how the three types of spirits – animal, vital, and natural – served by sinews, arteries, and veins, respectively, correspond to Plato's three faculties of the soul: Rational, Irascible, and Appetitory (9). For further examples of the slippage between 'soul' and 'spirit' or 'soul' and 'mind', see Nicholas Breton's *Solemne Passion of the Soules Love*, A2r; Woolnor's *True Originall of the Soule*, 13; John Woolton's *Immortalitie of the Soule*, fol. 14; and Thomas Wright's *Passions of the Minde*, 297, 300–301, in which he cites 'blindnesse of the Minde' as a proof of the imperfection of the soul, and, in a list of 'Problemes concerning the substance of our Soules', uses 'Spirit' in the sense of 'soul', and 'spirits' to refer to bodily substances, within the space of a few lines.

[20] See, for instance, Kate Narveson, 'Flesh, Excrement, Humors, Nothing', 315–16, and Rosalie Osmond, *Mutual Accusation*, 10, 21, 35.

corresponded with the values attached to the larger division between soul and body and thus facilitated the conflation of these parallel dichotomies. My position is that, in the same way, the use of 'spirit' and 'flesh' as metaphorical vehicles for positive and negative spiritual orientations cannot be finally isolated from thinking about the actual soul and body.

## Soul over Body, A Gendered Hierarchy

My designation thus far of the soul-body 'hierarchy' and my references to the most 'pervasive' or 'predominant' cultural coding of this relationship as gendered are not meant to belie the reality that early modern discourses concerning the body and soul are richly varied and complex, and even sometimes abandon altogether the prevalent model of this relationship as dichotomous. Nonetheless, when gender comes into play, as it so frequently does, the designation of the body as feminine and of the soul as masculine, in relation to each other, predominates, along with the assignment of certain key characteristics to each. Scholars such as Rosalie Osmond, Genevieve Lloyd, Thomas Laqueur, Ian Maclean, and W. Norris Clarke have already mapped the complex developments of body and soul theories from Plato (and earlier) into the early modern period, often with helpful attention to how these theories come to integrate gender.[21] I do not aim to recapitulate or revise

[21] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex*, uses the term 'one-sex body' to refer to the historical understanding of man as the standard against which woman was defined, often as a flawed or lacking version of man. Laqueur explores how bodies have been understood as functioning differently in reproduction, not because of biological evidence, but because of cultural and philosophical beliefs about the nature of femininity and masculinity. Laqueur is an excellent source for nuanced explanations of the views of Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen – so influential in the Renaissance – on all aspects of generation. Historically, physiological and anatomical descriptions of the body, Laqueur argues, *had* to express women's inferiority, an inferiority that was culturally and politically pre-established. Ian Maclean, 'Notion of Woman', 135–6, see also 143–7, offers a comprehensive account of explanations in 'medicine, anatomy, and physiology' of women's constitution, especially those inherited from Aristotle and Galen, that contributed to the idea of woman as an imperfect or lesser version of man. 'Even after the abandonment of the "imperfect male" theory' (when, after 1580, the indication in most 'ancient texts' that 'woman is colder and moister in dominant humours' begins to be thought of as 'functional' instead of as a 'sign of imperfection'), Maclean finds that 'physiologists retain the beliefs in the less perfect mental faculties of woman'. See also Kate Aughterson (ed.), *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook*, 43. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, give a lucid account in the section on 'Medical Understandings of Woman's Body' of how 'medical and popular theories of the body … constructed women's bodies as possessing dangerously unstable qualities. … All assumed that women, unlike men, were created not as something in themselves, but rather for gestation and man's bodily convenience' (18–30). Norris W. Clarke, 'Living on the Edge', 183–99, traces the idea, from Plato into the Enlightenment, of the human as 'frontier being' straddling the dimensions of matter and spirit, with attention to the layering of Christian thought over the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions.