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Performance Anxiety: Illness and The History of Mary Prince

In Chapters 3 and 4, I introduced the necessity of situating Romantic hypochondria in the contexts of British imperialism and the effects of colonialism. I want to make this point more persuasively here by examining the ways in which Mary Prince articulates a form of hypochondria that shows the disorder to be profoundly and deeply connected to questions of performance and the social, political, and cultural conditions that stabilize and make legible the experience of being sick.

When Prince dictated the narrative of her life as a West Indian slave, her body bore the marks of a cruel life as much as her story would. Her rheumatism had become debilitating and her back was ‘distinctly scarred … with the vestiges of severe floggings’ (1997, p. 130), all adding to a worsening ‘disease in the eyes’ which was approaching total blindness (p. 129). Prince’s bodily infirmities and pain are rooted in the treatment she received as a slave and The History of Mary Prince (1831) operates at one level as a catalogue of how an otherwise healthy girl grew to become an enfeebled woman whose body could not match her intellectual and moral vigor. One of the most significant things about The History is that it documents and narrates the deterioration of her well-being, something which could not be acknowledged by a system of slavery that aggressively neglected her complaints of infirmity and forced her, as she notes repeatedly, ‘to go about my usual work, though my body and limbs were so stiff and sore, that I could not move without the greatest pain’ (p. 69). The composition and publication of the text documents a process of retroactive self-fashioning in which Prince reimagines herself as an individual who could be and indeed was sick. What follows from Prince’s effort to represent her infirmities – disorders which had been neglected and discounted by the perpetual labor of slavery – is less a narrative of self-diagnosis than an act of giving an account of
herself and her relationship to health in the Romantic period. *The History* is a text in which descriptions of the author's infirmity are also part of a performative creation of the self as a subject who merits care and compassion, which is also to say a politicized account of how one becomes a healthy or unhealthy individual and a consideration of what it means to live beyond the purview of such norms.

Attending to Prince's pervasive rhetoric of health and the power of discourses of well-being to produce and police subjectivity involves asking at least two related questions. First, what does it mean for a slave to perform infirmity in an age in which the sick-role had become epidemic? Part of what makes *The History* such an intriguing intervention into medicalized discourse in the Romantic period is the manner in which Prince's insistent attention to her body – attention it could not previously attract – borders on becoming incessant, even pathological. While Prince's claims of illness reflect her desire to have her infirmities acknowledged by those around her, they also participate in a larger movement of cultivating sickness and exist as a complex symptom of the Romantic period's epidemic of hypochondria. Considering the ways in which Prince presents herself as a subject fixated upon ill health means understanding how her turn to medicalized discourses is more than an articulation of an emancipated subjectivity – to be healthy or sick, with all the freedoms and unfreedoms such normalizing constructions imply. This chapter traces how Romantic hypochondria, which is always a complexly ambivalent liberation from proper well-being – from being either healthy or sick – opens Prince's text to the possibility that it fails to articulate herself as an unhealthy body.

This prompts a second question: What does it mean for Prince to use a form of hypochondriacal attention to her body as the ground for an account of herself? To ask this is to query the manner in which the self appears as a product of social and political norms which govern how one can become legible and what can be said about oneself. It means thinking about hypochondria as a figure for how Prince's narrative of her life is never purely or simply her own, but is instead shaped by compulsory forms of social regulation.

If these questions can be answered, it will be by thinking through how Prince gives an account of herself as an unhealthy subject and how such a narrative production of the self is made possible. By reading *The History of Mary Prince* as a text concerned with how the self negotiates idealizations of well-being and how it participates in a larger and continuous project of producing an ethical subject, this chapter contends that we need to examine carefully Prince's infirm body, about which the text is so vocal.