"Joves great priviledge" : identity and morality in early modern women's writing

"Joves great Priviledge": Identity and Mortality in Early Modern Women's Writing

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This essay is an exploration of early modern women's writing about death, looking particularly at the impact of ideas of mortality on the understanding and inscription of female identity. The authors include Anne Southwell, Lucy Russell, Elizabeth Jocelin, Martha Moulsworth, Ann Fanshawe, Mary Carey, Katherine Philips, Hester Pulter and Margaret Cavendish, spanning the denominational spectrum from Roman Catholic to Quaker. Their chosen genres include poetry, devotions, autobiography and advice books, with contexts of authorship which range from apparently private writing in manuscript to the public permanence of texts literally carved in stone. The first section of the essay analyses examples of early modern women's writing in response to four main kinds of loss: the deaths of mothers, husbands, friends and children. In the second section, the focus is on the importance of mortality to the construction of early modern female identities. Issues raised include the gendering of death, the impact of mortality on women's sense of themselves as writers, and the prevailing intertextual influences (particularly classical and biblical) on ideas of women and death. The underlying aim of the essay is to advance our investigation and appreciation of a rich and as yet relatively unfamiliar body of early modern women's writing.

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In the south transept of the parish church of St. Nicholas, Montgomery, on the border of Wales and England, there is a magnificent example of a Renaissance funeral monument. The elaborate canopied tomb was erected by Magdalen Herbert for her late husband, Richard Herbert of Montgomery Castle, who died in 1596. Strangely, although Magdalen remarried, lived another thirty years and was eventually buried in Chelsea parish church, she is also commemorated on the tomb that she commissioned for her husband.[1] Richard Herbert's stone effigy depicts him as a knight in armour, and her likeness lies sculpted beside him, in a splendid dress carved to show all its richness and detail of embroidery. While it is Richard who has died and is memorialised here, he is further away from the viewer, close to the carved row of Herbert children kneeling in homage to their parents; Magdalen, though still alive when the monument was erected, is the figure closer to those who approach the tomb, to an extent obscuring the view of her husband. On the front of the canopy, we are told that Magdalen erected the tomb in memory of her Herbert lord, but the crests which embellish the stonework prominently include those of her own family, the Newports. In this architecture of mourning and glorification, the adoring and lamenting widow simultaneously honours her late husband and defines her own presence in Herbert family history. Confronted by mortality – her husband's and, in anticipation, her own – Magdalen Herbert constructs and projects her identity.

The paradoxes inherent in the Montgomery tomb highlight the central concern of this essay. What was the relationship between identity and mortality for early modern women? They lived, after all, in an era filled with death: life expectancy was short, especially for women facing the repeated danger of childbirth. Maternal and infant mortality rates were high, and there was the constant presence of the "foul contagion" (Milton 53) of plague and disease; death stalked the battlefields of home-bred uprisings and civil wars as well as campaigns abroad.[2] Indeed, as Donne put it in his seventh "Holy Sonnet," mortality was maintained by every possible means: "warre, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies, / Despaire, law, chance" (Donne 438-9). On the whole, it was women who dealt with the consequences: to them fell the role of stage-managing death, not just in the rather public manner of Magdalen Herbert, but more privately in the home, as layers-out of the dead and mourners of the family's loss. And in this early modern period, for the

[1] Magdalen Herbert was the mother of the priest and poet, George Herbert, and the philosopher and autobiographer, Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury; her funeral sermon was preached by John Donne.

[2] See, for example, Cressy, Doebler and Gittings.

first time (as far as we are aware), women were starting to write about the death around them, and about their own mortality, in fairly significant numbers. What did they have to say on this subject, one that was so fundamental to their experience and so profound an influence on their identity? Their writings on mortality – varied in form and tone yet consistently moving and revealing – form the main corpus of material to be discussed in the following pages.

It is vital to observe from the outset that women's identity was rarely their own but always already prescribed, in death just as in life. In her poem "Death," Katherine Philips observed that women's "soules and Fame" outlive their mortal bodies and "stay behind" to shape their posthumous reputation (Philips 191). As Jane Austen astutely commented in her novel *Emma*, a person "who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of" (194). When early modern women were "kindly spoken of," it was frequently in a funeral sermon, as in the case of Elizabeth Capell in 1660:

> For her constancy at her devotions, she was another *Anna*; for the unblameablenesse of her life, another *Elisabeth*; for her frequent and diligent attendance to the word of God, another *Mary*; for her charity to the poor, another *Dorcas*; for her great civility and hospitality, another *Martha*; for her fidelity and obedience to her Husband, another *Sarah*; and for her wisdome, gravity, sobriety, temperance, quietnesse and the like, exactly one of St. *Pauls* Godly *Matrons*. (Barker 37)

This summary of Lady Capell's life and character is indicative of the ways in which female identity was constructed by reference to existing models of womanhood. We might perhaps assume that the pre-text for a funeral sermon would be the actual life of the deceased, but Edmund Barker's words demonstrate that biblical examples such as Anna, Mary and Martha blend with her own actions in defining Elizabeth Capell's nature as it was preserved in retrospect. Her identity is the product of a number of intertextual influences meeting and intersecting: biblical models, feminine ideals as inscribed in contemporary conduct books, the generic and rhetorical conventions of a funeral sermon, and the specific liturgical context for which it was written. Identity is formed not only in the presence of mortality, but also through the weave of pretextual and intertextual influences associated with feminine perfection and consolation.

The aim of this essay is to enquire into the inter-relation of these factors in a number of early modern English texts in which women themselves write about death. To what extent did authorship under the weight of mortality lead women to move on from existing pre-texts and

forge new roles? The focal point of my discussion is the impact of ideas about mortality on the construction of female identity in seventeenth-century female-authored texts. What, for example, is the relative importance of gender and genre in women's writing about mortality? The choice of genre gives distinctive tone to the expression of grief and the exploration of identity, shaped by the intertextual inheritance of convention and expectation. Some modes of writing, however, were simply not available to female authors as a result of the absence of women from key social roles or institutional functions. The funeral sermon, for instance, was a significant but entirely male genre establishing public ideals of female identity. Was women's writing about death perhaps less centred on performance and publication? What were the significant modes of transmission and dissemination of these female texts? The relationship between identity and mortality could take a variety of forms depending on whether the women's words remained in private or family manuscripts, appeared in print, or were carved on marble. It is also vital to consider the extent to which attitudes to death and its aftermath were determined by religious allegiances: did these take precedence over all other considerations?

Underlying all of these questions is the increase in female authorship in English during the seventeenth century. It is this phenomenon which makes our investigations possible, but it also raises the key issue of the function of writing itself in relation to both identity and mortality. Early modern women's writing about death not only spans a range of emotional, rational and spiritual concerns, but also encompasses radical perceptions of the nature of authorship and its role in the face of mortality. These issues can only begin to be addressed in this brief essay, which offers a preliminary survey of the field in two main parts. The first is concerned with women's writing about particular kinds of death, analysing examples from each of the most common categories: the deaths of mothers, husbands, friends and children. The second part consolidates the results of these readings through further exploration of the importance of mortality to the construction of early modern female identities. In both sections, the purpose of my enquiry is to further the investigation and appreciation of a rich and as yet relatively unfamiliar body of women's writing.

Varieties of loss

Much writing by early modern women writers takes the experience of bereavement as its subject, whether moved by a specific loss or inspired by the anticipation of a touch from that "secret hand" that "Tumbles us into the Dust" (Philips 190). For many women, then as now, it was the death of their mother that first marked their own arrival at a defined identity as a mature individual. The mother's death forms the turning point of many early modern female autobiographies, giving rise to expressions of grief and eulogistic praise as well as self-examination and self-definition. In the diary of Anne Clifford, for example, the event of her mother's death in 1616 is noted and lamented, especially as her own unhappy marriage caused her to be absent from her mother at that crucial time. As if to make amends for this, Clifford instituted a commemoration of the moment when she and her mother parted for the last time by erecting a pillar at the point of their final separation and distributing bread and money to the poor annually on the date of their "grievous & heavy Parting" (Clifford 31). The loss of her "blessed mother" and the memory of their last shared moments prior to her death are regularly recalled in Clifford's subsequent diaries, right up to the penultimate entry written two days before Clifford's own death sixty years later in 1676 (Clifford 268). The tenacity of her respect and recollection suggests just how vital this commemoration was to Clifford's sense of her own life.

The Royalist exile, poet and philosopher Margaret Cavendish, who published a memoir of her "Birth, Breeding and Life" in 1656, included in it a prominent and devoted account of her mother, culminating in her mother's death as a defining point in her own development. In typical mid-seventeenth-century fashion, personal and political grief go hand in hand in this passage, which not only laments the loss of an ideal parent but also registers Cavendish's intense anger at the inhumane treatment of her mother by parliamentarian forces during the civil wars, which she felt had hastened her mother's death:

> But in such misfortunes my mother was of an heroic spirit, in suffering patiently where there is no remedy, or to be industrious where she thought she could help. She was of a grave behaviour, and had such a majestic grandeur, as it were continually hung about her, that it would strike a kind of awe to the beholders, and command respect from the rudest. (I mean the rudest of civilised people; I mean not such barbarous people as plundered her and used her cruelly. For they would have pulled God out of heaven, had they had power, as they did royalty out of his throne.) Also her beauty was beyond the ruin of time, for she had a well-favoured loveliness in her face, a pleasing sweetness in her countenance, and a well-tempered com-

> plexion (as neither too red, nor too pale) even to her dying hour, although in years. And by her dying one might think that death was enamoured with her, for he embraced her in a sleep, and so gently, as if he were afraid to hurt her. (Graham et al. 92)

Cavendish's mother emerges from this passage as a female equivalent of the executed king, Charles I, who was "pulled out of his throne" by the "barbarous" enemy: she, too, was heroic, patient, majestic and awe-inspiring. The writer's private love for her mother merges with an outraged sense of political loyalty. In this adoring portrait, Cavendish's mother is seen to inspire a kind of awe in death himself, who is gentler than the plundering army that had earlier attacked her and her family, "pulled down their houses, and sequestered them from their lands and livings" (Graham et al. 91). Death is in the business of stealing this "well-favoured" lady from the realm of life itself, but he approaches like a lover and is said to have "embraced her" while she slept. It is of great significance that Cavendish envisages a gendered figure of death in this case.[3] Like so many representations of the grim reaper, this is a distinctly male presence, here seducing the female who has remained beautiful "even to her dying hour." The account ends poignantly, with Cavendish's mother not – as we might expect – afraid of death, but with death, surprisingly, seeming to be "afraid to hurt her."

What happens to the gendering of death when a woman writes of the loss of her husband? Interestingly, death itself is less frequently personified in these circumstances since a pairing of man and woman is implicit in the original earthly relationship between the speaker and the departed. As one bereft wife, Mrs Winchcombe, wrote in an epitaph found in St Peter's church, Wittenham in Oxfordshire, "I loved thee living and lament thee dead."[4] This neatly balanced line captures the double sources of emotion drawn upon in women's elegies for their husbands. It is a poetic mode which succinctly combines passionate memory ("loved thee") with the need for expression of mourning ("lament thee"); there is little room for the character of death itself in this existing intimacy. But what does a woman like the thrice-widowed Martha Moulsworth do when she recounts the deaths of all three husbands in her autobiographical poem "The Memorandum of Martha Moulsworth, Widdowe"? This fascinating text, hidden away in manuscript until as recently as 1996, was written on the author's fifty-fifth birthday in

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[3] See Guthke.

[4] Winchcombe's poem is included in the very fine anthology, *Early Modern Women Poets* (Stevenson and Davidson 172). Wherever possible, poetic quotations are taken from this anthology, to enable readers to investigate the material further without difficulty.

1632. In it she makes sense of the deaths of her husbands by incorporating them into the calendar of the church year:

> My husbands all on holly dayes did die
> Such day, such waie, they to the Saints did hye
> This life is worke-day even att the Best
> butt christian death, an holly day of Rest
> the ffirst, the ffirst of Martirs did befall
> Saint Stevens ffeast to him was ffuneral
> the morrowe after christ our fflesh did take
> this husband did his mortall fflesh forsake
> (Stevenson and Davidson 128)

This part of Moulsworth's poem, in which she contemplates the timing of her first husband's death, suggests that she found solace and a certain kind of symmetry in the fact that he forsook his "mortall fflesh" on St. Steven's Day, December 26, one day after Christ had first put on the equivalent fleshly dress at the nativity. The old pre-Reformation church structures still had a strong hold on the Protestant imagination well into the seventeenth century, and seem to have been a source of comfort and order to Moulsworth, helping her to make sense of her repeated widowing and to see it as part of a larger providential scheme. She goes on to point out that her second husband "tooke his happy way" on October 28, the double saints' day of SS. Jude and Simon, an apt date for an Englishman's death since "an auncient Story" tells us that Simon brought the faith to England, and Jude taught us to fight for it. As for her third husband, for whom her tears have "nott dried" in the two years since his death,

> The last on Saint Mathias day did wend
> unto his home, and pilgrimages ende
> this feast comes in that season which doth bringe
> vppon dead Winters cold, a lyvelie Springe
> His Bodie winteringe in the lodge of death
> Shall ffeele A springe, with budd of life, and Breath
> And Rise in incorruption, glorie, power
> Like to the bodie of our Saviour (128)

This springtime death – St. Mathias' Day being May 14 – is rendered symbolic by Moulsworth who turns it into a token of the promised resurrection after a period of "wintering in the lodge of death." The vision of death and the afterlife here is vivid, seasonal and tangible, making full use of the earthly dimensions of time and space which mattered so much to Moulsworth. Her poem is constructed to equal her age and

embody her identity, with fifty-five couplets to match the years of her life so far; she consciously refers to the poem as having been written on "the birthday of myself and of these lines." In writing of her life and analysing the significance of the three dates on which she lost her husbands, she can begin to give order to her existence and transform the disorder of mortality.

Although the majority of early modern female-authored elegiac writing concerns the deaths of family members, some sense of the enormously significant impact of mortality may also be gained from the poems on the deaths of friends written by women in this period. Occasionally these commemorate male friends, as in the case of Hester Pulter's lament for the loss of Sir George Lisle and Sir Charles Lucas, "shott to death at Colechester" in 1648 (Stevenson and Davidson 193), or major public figures such as Charles I.[5] More frequently, however, it is female friends who are being mourned, as in the case of Anne Southwell's 1627 poem on her friend Cicely MacWilliam. The poem's title, "An Elegy to the Countesse of London Derrye supposyenge hir to be dead by hir longe silence," already alerts us to the uncertainty of the boundary between life and death, and highlights the lack of swift or accurate information about deaths in the early modern period. Writing in dreadful anxiety, Southwell addresses the "fayre soule," her friend, in "blotted lines" which tell of how "this earths Darke wombe / is but a wardrobe till the day of Dome" (Stevenson and Davidson 121). She imagines a heaven filled with "many Ladyes more" and asks this "Good Lady, friend, or rather lovely Dame," who has now left behind her "clayie frame," for further information about existence in eternity (122). As the poem draws to a close, however, Southwell begins to realise the folly of this pretended conversation:

> But stay my wanderinge thoughts, alas where made I?
> In speaking to a dead, a senceless Lady.
> Yow Incke, and paper, be hir passeinge bell,
> The Sexton to hir knell, be Anne Southwell. (123)

In the agony of her presumed loss of a good friend, the female poet finally finds a role for herself, and for her writing.[6] There is no funeral service for her to attend, and even if there were Southwell would not be able to fulfil any of the formal functions within it, or commemorate her

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[5] See, for example, Katherine Philips, "Upon the double murther of K. Charles" (Philips 69-70).

[6] Sadly, Southwell's assumption that her friend was dead turned out to be correct, and she subsequently wrote an epitaph for MacWilliam. See Klene, and Stevenson and Davidson 124.

friend in a funeral sermon, being a woman. Poetry, however, can take the place of these more practical rituals: the writer can become the "Sexton" who rings out the "passeinge bell" not of a church but of her text. As a writer confronting the mortality of her friend, Southwell can, like the Sexton, call others to mourn and fulfil the material functions of the church officer, recording the burial and ensuring the proper commemoration of the dead.

A poem such as this on the death of a friend asserts that writing can serve a deeply therapeutic purpose: even if the text is not published in print form, it can become a kind of action, fulfilling the urge to do something in the face of mortality and loss. If death cannot be staved off by a woman's care and medicinal knowledge, it can in some way be kept under control by their solidarity as expressed in writing. The Quaker Jane Sowle, for instance, published an elegy – entitled "A short Testimony" – for her friend Anne Whithead in 1680, and after expressing sorrow at her death, turned her account of the dead woman into the rousing rhetoric of prayer:

> But since it doth to us befall,
> And God did to himself her call;
> Let us beg of him that he will
> Our Women with his Spirit fill,
> And make them able to withstand
> Truth's Opposers at ev'ry hand,
> Till they Gods Work have finished
> And all in Peace laid down the head,
> And Crown'd with Glory into Heaven
> So let it be, O Lord, *Amen*
> (Stevenson and Davidson 392)

Sowle's poem is an expression of the acceptance of Whithead's death as God's will, but it is not in any way passive in the face of this sad circumstance. These closing lines represent an active response to the fact of mortality, and a call to action specifically focused on Quaker "Women" whose tasks are to fulfil "Gods Work." The double insistence at the end is bold and visionary: "Let it be" is repeated in the "*Amen*," meaning "So be it," and the poem ends on a note of radical confidence in the future, both on earth and in "Heaven."

The woman-centred vision of Sowle's poem raises the issue of gender and death once more. While Cavendish envisaged death itself as male, writers such as Southwell and Sowle suggest a specifically female response to the death of another woman. The first uses her writing as a womanly alternative to the sexton's tolling of "hir knell," while the sec-

ond instils a distinctly *female* sense of Quaker solidarity inspired by the sad passing of their friend. However, the gendered experience of loss is perhaps at its most acute in the context of motherhood and the deaths of children, which – perhaps not surprisingly – form the subject of the largest group of female texts in this period to concern themselves with mortality. In women's diaries and autobiographies, in their manuscript commonplace books, in their published collections of poetry, and even on the walls of churches, female authors from this period can be found coming to terms with the deaths of their own and other women's children. The impact of these texts can be overwhelming. Alice Thornton's *Book of Remembrances* records so many instances of infant mortality that it comes close in generic terms to the painstakingly preserved list of births and deaths in a family bible. Mary Carey is known to modern readers almost exclusively as the writer of agonised poems on the deaths of her children, while among the most memorable of Katherine Philips's lyrics is her elegy to her "first and dearest childe," Hector. The poem begins by pointing out that the child lived a mere forty days, and continues:

> I did but see him, and he disappear'd,
> I did but touch the Rose=bud, and it fell;
> A sorrow unfore=seen and scarcely fear'd,
> Soe ill can mortals their affliction spell.
>
> And now (sweet Babe) what can my trembling heart
> Suggest to right my doleful fate or thee?
> Tears are my Muse, and sorrow all my Art,
> So piercing groans must be thy Elogy.
>
> (Philips 220)

These stanzas – the second and third of a five-stanza lyric – focus particularly on the role of the mourning mother. With finely restrained rhetoric, she highlights the brevity of her relationship with Hector: the repeated phrase "I did but . . ." is followed by a declining cadence in the second half of each line. The "Rose=bud," with all its tightly-packed sweet potential, never opens but merely falls from the stem, unfulfilled, with a sorrowful effect "unfore=seen" by the speaker. This "doleful" event is so devastating that it cannot be set "to right," though surely there is an implied pun here, suggesting that the child's mother is called "to write" to ensure that he is remembered. However, her only inspiration is her speechless grief: tears and groans are all that she can offer her son. There are echoes here of the conventions of elegiac writing; the protestation of artlessness may appear to recall the familiar trope of (false) humility. But this assumption does require qualification in gender

terms. When a woman was writing about the loss of a child, her work was expected to be unpolished, hampered by the twin handicaps of excessive emotion and an absence of training in rhetorical skills. Paradoxically, Philips's mourning is indeed her "Muse," not because it reduces her to silent tears, but in the sense that it inspires and licenses her to find a verbal and artistic outlet for her "piercing groans." She does have both a "Muse" and her own "Art": grief moves her to write a most haunting, and indeed most artful, "Elogy."

The relationship between gender and genre in this case is an intriguing one. Proportionally fewer elegies to children were written by early modern fathers,[7] suggesting that Katherine Philips was not alone in discerning in the cruel experience of child mortality a vocation and justification to write as a woman. There is also a clear sense of distinctively female grief and self-condemnation in those elegies written by women. When Gertrude Aston, Mrs Thimelby, wrote a poem "on the Death of Her Only Child," she specifically drew attention to her own responsibility for this early loss:

> Deare Infant, 'twas thy mother's fault
> So soone inclos'd thee in a vault:
> And fathers good, that in such hast
> Has my sweet child in heaven plac'd.
> I'le weepe the first as my offence,
> Then joy that he made recompence:
> Yet must confesse my frailty such
> My joy by griefe's exceeded much:
> Though I, in reason, know thy blisse
> Can not be wish'd more than it is,
> Yet this selfe love orerules me soe;
> I'de have thee here, or with thee goe.
> (Stevenson and Davidson 255)

This elegy is striking in its harsh self-deprecation: not only does Thimelby blame herself for the poor child's death, but she goes on to use the terms "offence," "frailty" and "selfe love" in describing her own condition. Her sense of responsibility for the death itself – a tragedy which she assumes to be her "fault" – does not seem to be guilt enough, since she perceives her desire to hang on to the child as a selfish longing, too. The poem, written by the Catholic Thimelby in the privacy of an Aston family manuscript, has the tone and function of a confession. While the maternal role before and after the death of the child is evi-

[7] The great exception is Ben Jonson, whose elegies "On my First Son" and "On my First Daughter" are among the most celebrated of the period.

dently considered a sin to be confessed, the role of the "father," whether human or divine, is seen as positive and compensatory. The division of gender roles in mourning could not be more clearly and painfully etched.

One is tempted to consider that such sorrowful honesty about a mother's longing for her dead child, and such cruel castigation of her own role, might be given expression only in the intensity of verse cloistered in the quiet space of a private notebook. But Thimelby is not alone in castigating herself like this. Ann Fanshawe, writing a prose memoir for her son in a much more matter-of-fact mode, ascribes the outcome of all her successful births to her husband, while the dead or miscarried infants whom she lists are declared to be hers:

> My dear husband had six sons and eight daughters borne and christned, and I miscarryed of 6 more, 3 at severall times, and once of 3 sons when I was about half gone my time. (Fanshawe 106)

Since only three of Ann Fanshawe's many progeny ultimately reached adulthood, this division of responsibility represents a massive burden of physical fortitude and emotional endurance on her part. She seems to take it for granted that the failed births belong to her, absorbing and identifying with the gendering of blame.

Meanwhile Fanshawe's contemporary, Sarah Davy, was apparently motivated to write her conversion narrative, *Heaven Realized*, by the need to explore and expiate a sense of sinfulness associated with the death of her younger brother. In this prose work, published after her death by her Baptist minister in 1670, Davy recalls how she used to play the role of mother to her younger siblings, and hints at a deep sense of guilt over the young boy's death:

> I remember on a time a little brother of mine was sick, and my mother being very tender of her child, one Lord's day would not go to church, which caused me also to stay at home; but wanting employment, out of my mother's sight went to work about my babies. At night the Lord was pleased to take away the child, I standing by the cradle, which brought a fear upon me presently that I had been the cause, by my working that day, of the Lord's anger in taking away my brother. (Graham et al. 168)

The intimacy of the maternal function fulfilled by Davy is poignantly, if unconsciously, suggested in the phrase "my babies," and reflected in her profound feelings of guilt for the three grievous sins highlighted in this extract. In the first place, she is caused to disobey her (heavenly) father by not attending church; she then goes ahead and looks after the chil-

dren "out of my mother's sight," disobeying her, too; thirdly, she works on "that day," Sunday, when good Christians should rest, and in breaking this commandment she evokes "the Lord's anger." This is a distinctly Protestant perspective on guilt, marked by "fear" of the Lord and a dark foreboding of judgement even as she stands "by the cradle." The mixture of domesticity and dread is disconcertingly bound up with her long-held fear of having caused her brother's death. Once again, as with Thimelby and Fanshawe, the weight of guilt is specified in the woman's text as the maternal burden, and this gendering of grief appears to override differences of belief, genre or readership. Whether in a private Catholic poem, a Royalist family memoir or a published narrative to encourage the Baptist faithful, a specifically female identity is forged in the bitterness of loss.

Taking the psychology of guilt yet one step further, there is also at least one early modern text in which a mother expresses her perplexity and shame at the fact that her child has *not* died while an apparently much stronger boy has succumbed. The title of Katherine Austen's 1644 poem sums up its subject: "Upon Robin Austins recovery of the small pox and General Pophams son John diing of them." Austen begins by suggesting that her child was destined and deserved to die, and then proceeds to speculate on the reasons for the strange turn of fate:

> Why was mine spar'd and one so strong
> Whose lively health, judg'd to live long
> A verdant youth, in's growing Spring
> The Prince of all the Schollars. Him
> A jewell in his parents eye
> And this so lov'd a youth, did dye.
> He strong by nature, and mine frail
> Was spar'd, the other did exhail.
> Was it his sin, or our desert,
> Made mine to live, and him to part?
> O noe my Lord. My handes (I doe) uphold
> It was thy will, nor dare be bold
> To search thy secrets, or ask why
> My weak son liv'd, a strong did dye.
> (Stevenson and Davidson 315)

These "bold" questions about the most fundamental mysteries, the reasons for life and death, are briefly raised by Austen, but then closed off and further enquiry prevented: "O noe my Lord. . . / It was thy will." However, the damage has been done; though it is not permitted to "search thy secrets," Austen's close encounter with the mortality of youth has already given rise to the desire to search, and the question is

not withdrawn but remains in her text. Anxiety, sorrow and relief mingled together have emboldened her muse.

From these examples it is clear that the widespread experience of loss – of mothers, husbands, friends and children – moved early modern women to write in considerable numbers. The unhappy necessities of mortality led women to transfer their practical roles as mothers, nurses and stage-managers of family deaths into a redefined, and defining, sense of the muse. However unwelcome these reminders of mortality were for early modern women, it is fascinating to note how these circumstances moved them to write in ways that were gender-specific, whether in the personification of death or in the practices of mourning, and gave them new identities: the sexton, the historian, the philosopher, the poet. In the following section, we will investigate further some of the ways in which ideas of mortality redirected female rhetoric and redefined their sense of selfhood.

Identity in mortality

The material of this essay is, almost inevitably, serious and at times deeply moving. However, it is important to remember that death and mortality were so much a part of everyday life (as it were) in the early modern period that these subjects did not always require respectful treatment. Indeed, in these circumstances there is a particular need for wit, that widely available early modern phenomenon, as a defence against melancholy. In the following riposte by an anonymous "Gentlewoman"[8] to a would-be seducer who threatens to die if she refuses his advances, the joke is not so much on death itself as on those who think they can manipulate the threat of mortality to suit their own ends:

> You say sir that yor-life depends
> Upon my love, and with it ends;
> In this you commit sacriledge
> For it is Joves great Priviledge
> To rule the fates, the starres and all
> That's heavenly or terrestriall
> His Pouer you flatly doe deny;
> In sayinge if I refuse, you dy
> To him thus false if you can be,
> I wonder what you'le prove to me?
> (Stevenson and Davidson 169)

[8] "A Gentlewomans answer to one, that sayd he should dye, if shee refuse his desires" (c. 1636), from BL Add. MS 22,603, f. 21r.

The tone of the female voice here is lively yet indignant: does the young man think that he can simply command death to come and take him away, promptly and conveniently, in order to make a woman feel guilty (again)? Her answer is a firm negative: to inflict death is "Joves great Priviledge," not ours. And if a man is false in representing himself as having some power over death, then he will surely be false to his beloved as well.

This light-hearted talk of death, employing a sparkling wit and a rueful rationality rather than a strongly emotional reaction to the man's threat, gives the author of this verse (whoever she was) a distinctive voice. This is not the kind of rhetoric generally expected in a text dealing with the idea of mortality, but it is one of many instances in early modern women's writing where a response to a death (or its threat), or the anticipation of their own demise, creates a space for female identity. In the parish church of Burford in Oxfordshire, the tomb of Sir Laurence Tanfield is inscribed with a poem by his grieving widow Elizabeth, in the course of which she declares that "Love made me a poet / And this I writ" (Stevenson and Davidson 95). Interestingly, although it may have been her affection for her husband which inspired her poetry, Lady Tanfield did not express it in verse until this moment of bereavement. In reality, then, it was *death* which made her a poet, an identity given permanence by the material presence of her words among "marble" and "gilded monuments."[9]

When the poet Hester Pulter laments "the Death of my deare and lovely Daughter Jane Pulter" in 1646, the verse in which she expresses her sorrow at the loss of her twenty-year-old daughter marks a change in her own identity as she is forced to acknowledge the transformation of Jane's being. The closing lines of this long elegy return to the moment of her child's death:

> But what a heart had I, when I did stand
> Holding her forehead with my Trembling hand
> My Heart to Heaven with her bright Spirit flyes
> Whilst shee (ah mee) closed up her lovely eyes
> Her soule being seated in her place of birth
> I turnd a Niobe as shee turn'd earth.
> (Stevenson and Davidson 193)

[9] From the opening line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 (Shakespeare 587); Tanfield's poetic gifts were evidently passed on to her daughter, Elizabeth Cary, author of *The Tragedie of Mariam* (1613), the first original play in English written by a woman.

Immediately before her daughter's death, Pulter's emphasis, not surprisingly, is on her intense feelings and her unity with Jane in the young woman's hour of death. The mother is aware of the fullness of her heart and trembles with dread as her daughter closes her eyes and dies. The repeated word here is "heart," the seat of Pulter's emotions. After Jane's death, Pulter's heart seems to vanish in the numbness of loss – "My Heart to Heaven with her bright Spirit flyes" – and the new word introduced and repeated in the last line is "turn'd." The revolutionary impact of death turns her daughter into "earth," the dust from which she came, and simultaneously transforms the poet herself into "a Niobe." Pulter's pre-text here is the Greek myth of Niobe, the mourning mother turned to stone. Death has not only returned the daughter to the earth but has re-created the mother in the light of this intertextual model, inspiring and transfixing her identity in sorrow. Like Niobe – and the figure of Magdalen Herbert on her husband's tomb in Montgomery – Hester Pulter is turned (metaphorically) to heartless stone, even at the moment when her heart is overflowing with grief.

In their mourning, therefore, as well as their virtuous living (as in our opening extract from Elizabeth Capell's funeral sermon), early modern women were shaped by pre-texts such as classical and biblical ideals. While Pulter drew on her knowledge of the classical tradition to express her sense of herself as a mother in mourning, her fellow-poet Mary Carey took strength from biblical example in a similar circumstance. In her elegy on the death of her fifth child, Peregrine, in 1652, she takes comfort from the fact that her namesake, the Virgin Mary, gave up her own son to death, and echoes Mary's words of acceptance in the Magnificat in her own remarkable closing lines:

> My Dearest Lord; hast thou fulfill'd thy will,
> thy hand maid's pleas'd, Compleatly happy still:
> (Greer et al. 158)

Indeed, one defining death that underlay the lives and consciousness of most early modern women, and particularly in their own grief, was the passion of Christ. This redemptive death, with a shared significance for all Christian believers, was given a specifically gendered treatment by some early modern women writers, who saw it as offering a special identity for women among the faithful. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century proto-feminist pamphlets, for instance, defended women by citing the example of the two Marys who stayed at the foot of the cross

when all but one of the male disciples fled for their lives.[10] Aemelia Lanyer precedes her extended poem on the passion, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), with dedicatory poems to nine named women, followed by a prefatory epistle in which she reminds her "Vertuous Reader" that Christ began by being "begotten . . . borne . . . nourished of a woman" and ended by appearing after his resurrection "first to a woman" (Lanyer 48-50).

Within the poem itself, Lanyer presents her depiction of the scene of the crucifixion specifically to her primary reader, Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland (the beloved mother whom Anne Clifford later commemorated with her annual distribution to the poor):

> Loe, here was glorie, miserie, life and death,
> An union of contraries did accord;
> Gladnesse and sadnesse here had one berth,
> This wonder wrought the Passion of our Lord,
> He suffring for all the sinnes of all th'earth,
> No satisfaction could the world afford:
> But this rich Jewell, which from God was sent,
> To call all those that would in time repent.
>
> Which I present (deare Lady) to your view,
> Upon the Crosse depriv'd of life or breath,
> To judge if ever Lover were so true,
> To yeeld himselfe unto such shamefull death:
> (Lanyer 105)

The female recipient of this scene, and of all the benefits offered by its "union of contraries," is presented with a "rich Jewell," whose wondrous "Passion" led him to be "depriv'd of life" on the cross. Lanyer invites the woman who contemplates Christ's death to rank his self-sacrifice higher than the commitment of any ordinary "Lover." Like Margaret Cavendish's account of her mother's dying in the arms of an "enamoured" death, this is an overtly gendered response, though here Lanyer suggests that it is not death itself but Christ the saviour who is like a lover. The trope of Christ the beloved, familiar from the tradition of medieval mysticism, is given a particular poignancy when it is used by women writers in the context of their own loss. Mary Carey's 1650 elegy on the death of her "4th, & only Child, Robert" makes a kind of bargain with God:

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[10] See Henderson and McManus.

Change wth me; doe, as I have done
give me thy all; Even thy deare sonne:

Tis Jesus Christ; lord I would have;
he's thine, mine all; 'tis him I crave:
(Greer et al. 156)

With the astounding boldness of grief, Carey urges God to give up his son just as she has hers; she turns from mourning her son to expressing her longing for Christ as the new beloved, the replacement (as it were) for her departed child. With Christ in this role, then she is assured of redemption and can face death herself: the poem ends, "Enoughe my lord; now let me dye" (157).

As this elegy reminds us, writing about another's death is never far removed from the subject of one's own mortality. It is clear that Carey herself was ready for death after the loss of her only child, though she called for an end to her life only when assured of closeness to Christ. Early modern women prepared for death not only by means of the prayer and repentance expected of all Christians,[11] but also with a strong sense of female examples to follow, from biblical to more contemporary models. As Lady Jane Grey is said to have written "with a pinne" the night before she was beheaded in 1554, aged 16, "This is my fate today, tomorrow it may be yours" (Bentley 102). Though public execution was largely reserved for royal women, religious martyrs and supposed witches, the "fate" of death itself was constantly anticipated by women of this period. In particular, the expectation of death in childbirth gave rise to a new genre: the mother's advice book, written before going into labour and intended for the child yet to be born.[12] Elizabeth Jocelin prefaced her work, *The mothers legacie, to her vnborne childe* (1624), with what she clearly felt was a necessary justification of her action in writing:

> But still it came into my mind that death might deprive me of time if I should neglect the present. I knew not what to doe: I thought of writing, but then mine owne weaknes appeared so manifestly, that I was ashamed, and durst not undertake it. But when I could find no other means to expresse my motherly zeale, I encouraged my selfe . . . (Jocelin B2v-B3r)

Once again, the impact of mortality – in this case, not the death of a husband or child but her own, perhaps imminent, death – worked as the

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[11] See, for example, Taylor.

[12] See Valerie Wayne, "Advice for women from mothers and patriarchs," Wilcox 56-79.

encouragement to Jocelin to give written expression to her "motherly zeal."

However hard women tried with their medicinal remedies, textual manoeuvres or heartfelt prayers, they could not achieve the miracle of controlling death; Jocelin did indeed die in childbed, and her advice to her child was published posthumously. But there is strong evidence that early modern women undertook as far as possible to anticipate what Donne, quoting Psalm 68.20 in his sermon known as *Deaths Duell*, called the "issues of death" (*Sermons* X 230). Lucy Russell, for example, writing on the death of Cecilia Bulstrode in 1609, fortified herself (and Donne, to whom the poem was sent) with the confident sense that death's "hand gave not this blow," telling the falsely-proud emblem of mortality that "to destroy the just is not thy part" (Stevenson and Davidson 131). Katherine Philips expressed the hope, in her poem "Death," that her "actions" would prove "a nobler Epitaph, / Then that I onely Liv'd and Dy'd" (191). Martha Moulsworth, in more domestic vein in her poetic "Memorandum," resists the "prophane" temptation to speculate on which of her three late husbands would be hers in heaven; in fact, her poem ends not with any longing for death but with an expression of contentment with her widow's life for the foreseeable future.

Margaret Cavendish, also preoccupied with the future, gives the dangers of posthumous reputation – or as she envisaged it, the lack of it – as the ultimate reason for writing her autobiographical memoir:

> But I verily believe some censuring readers will scornfully say, why hath this lady writ her own life? . . . I answer that it is true, that 'tis no purpose to the readers but it is to the authoress, because I write it for my own sake, not theirs. Neither did I intend this piece for to delight, but to divulge; not to please the fancy, but to tell the truth. Lest after-ages should mistake, in not knowing I was daughter to one Master Lucas of St John's near Colchester in Essex, second wife to the Lord Marquis of Newcastle; for my lord having had two wives, I might easily have been mistaken, especially if I should die and my lord marry again. (Graham et al. 98-9)

In these, the last sentences of her "True Relation," Cavendish moves from the pre-texts of her life into an attempt to create what we might call her post-text, in a bid to prevent the oblivion which is so often women's fate in history. The anticipation of her death, and the possibility of its wiping out her name and individual identity, leads her to the construction of a textual afterlife.

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In this exploration of early modern women's writing on death, we have not only seen the extent to which "Joves great Priviledge" was exercised in the period, but also the ways in which women responded to the repeated evidence of mortality around them, and found themselves transformed by it in their prose and poetry. A number of women, indeed, sensed that they had found their functions and voices as writers under the pressure of personal loss or their own imminent demise, as texts such as those of Anne Southwell, Elizabeth Tanfield and Elizabeth Jocelin demonstrate. Others took on a new identity in the face of another's death, as is shown in poems such as those by Hester Pulter, Jane Sowle and Katherine Austen. The modes of writing span the range from private devotions and poems in manuscript to printed conversion narratives and carved epitaphs, though the close inter-relation of the public and the personal is often in evidence, as in these lines from Mrs Winchcombe's poem inscribed upon her husband's tomb:

> And tis for others too I put this stone
> To me thy tombe shal be my heart alone.
> (Stevenson and Davidson 172)

The complex interplay of heart and tomb, female and male, intimate memory and public honour, is at work in many of the texts we have glimpsed in the course of this essay. Although the women's social, political and religious allegiances also vary widely – our examples have included aristocrats and housewives, Royalists and radicals, Catholics and Quakers – it has become clear that there was much common ground among women across their communities. This was particularly in evidence in our exploration of the expressions of guilt at the deaths of children in the work of Thimelby, Davy and Fanshawe, in which the boundaries of denomination and literary genre were less significant than shared attitudes and experience. Written responses to mortality were undoubtedly dependent upon, and shaped by, the particular context of loss, the belief of the writer, the chosen or available genre and the intended readership of the text in question, but the common grounds of gender and shared mortality are consistently present. A further common element is the strongly post-Reformation context in which all the authors, regardless of their own personal faith, were operating. In the absence of the medieval Catholic traditions of chantry chapels, requiem masses and repeated prayers on the anniversaries of deaths, writing itself must forge a new commemorative space. Anne Clifford's diary, with its definition of dates and places by their links with those who have died, is

a fascinating instance of textuality replacing, or reinventing, spiritual practice.

In all these remarkable and moving texts by early modern women dealing with death, there is an overwhelming sense of resilience to its power: as Lucy Russell wrote in the last line of her elegy to Cecilia Bulstrode, echoing 1 Corinthians 15.15, "The grave no conquests gets, Death has no sting" (Stevenson and Davidson 131). This resistance to mortality emerges in strategies of faith, practicality and wit, as the poems of Mary Carey, Martha Moulsworth and the anonymous "Gentlewoman" respectively demonstrate. Women can also be seen using their writing to plan and order a posthumous life or reputation where possible. They endured the miserable experience of others' deaths around them, and frequently anticipated their own, which in the case of women often came prematurely; however, women like Margaret Cavendish were pushed by consciousness of mortality into constructing a textual afterlife for themselves as well as for those whom they lost. In determining a posthumous identity – what we might call a post-textuality – the woman writer was, in fact, paralleling on paper what Magdalen Herbert achieved in stone in Montgomery parish church: commemoration of others or of themselves, and thus self-definition. So, although these early modern women writers were not quite assuming "Jove's great Priviledge" in controlling or assigning death, we may with confidence claim that their words were an attempt to steal some of his thunder.

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