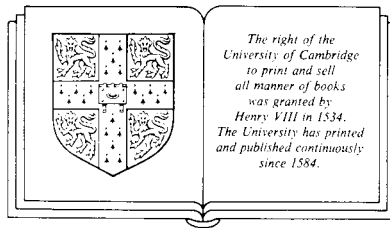


GRIEF AND
ENGLISH RENAISSANCE
ELEGY

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INTRODUCTION

I began the research for this book in an effort to understand two lines in one of the most famous poems in the language:

And O ye *Dolphins*, waft the hapless youth.
Weep no more, wofull shepherds weep no more....

This leap from plaintive helplessness to authoritative consolation has troubled many readers of 'Lycidas'. How can the speaker's voice change so abruptly and dramatically? Infusion of grace? Intervention of Michael the archangel? Neither of these solutions seemed persuasive to me, and although I had no explanation to offer, I remained convinced of the unity of 'Lycidas'. My own groping for an explanation led me to Milton's allusive criticisms and revisions of pastoral elegy, particularly Virgil's *Eclogue* 10 and Theocritus' *Idyll* 1. It occurred to me that what gave the poem its unity was Milton's insistence on the inability of pastoral to console for death; Milton was triumphantly opposing Christian consolation to pagan mourning. I was rather pleased with this interpretation – even though it did not explain the shift of voice – until I asked myself what was Christian about consolation, what was pagan about mourning, and what were the attitudes of Milton and his contemporaries to consolation and mourning?

When I began to investigate these questions, my understanding of mourning in Renaissance England was largely restricted to the lines from *Twelfth Night* which I have prefixed to the second chapter, and to Jonson's 'Of Death'.

He that feares death, or mournes it, in the iust,
Shewes of the resurrection little trust.

Here was confirmation of the notion that mourning was unchristian. I had no suspicion that Jonson is far from representative of the early seventeenth century: his attitude towards mourning is a throwback to the 1550s. I did not realize that attitudes

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towards mourning changed significantly during the English Renaissance, but I quickly learned that I was not alone because literary and cultural historians have paid little attention to mourning despite a number of studies on death and the *ars moriendi* tradition.

Attitudes to mourning begin to change towards the end of the sixteenth century. In the early part of the century Englishmen are acutely anxious about grief, which they regard as subversive of the rule of reason and domestic and social order. The bereaved are likely to feel – and be made to feel – that their grief reveals their irrationality, weakness, inadequate self-control, and impiety. The major purpose of consolation is to induce the bereaved to suppress grief, and authorities on the letter of consolation deploy a battery of reasons in their attack on the bereaved, oblivious to what George Eliot calls ‘that insensibility to another’s hardship which applies precept to soothe pain’. Some theologians condemn all mourning as evidence of lack of faith, and others allow a moderation in mourning which hardly differs from complete suppression of grief. By the first decades of the seventeenth century total condemnation of mourning entirely disappears from the moral and theological tracts, while increasingly more tolerant conceptions of moderation take its place. Sympathy for bereavement is more prominent than anxiety at exceeding the bounds of moderation. In the letter-writing formularies condolence ceases to be an opening gambit, a ploy to secure the bereaved’s attention before marshalling reasons to give over grief; it becomes an integral part of the letter, occasionally its major purpose.

This historical sketch of the emergence of a more compassionate and less anxious attitude towards mourning requires a few qualifications and explanations. First, the more sympathetic attitude does not replace the more severe one, which is still held by a number of people today, and Jonson, to take the most extreme example, is a reminder that the emergence of sympathy is neither uniform nor unilateral. Second, the reasons for the shift in attitude are obscure, and it seems to me that it is too early to offer an explanation. Not enough is known about the history of the emotions and of the family, and more detailed studies are needed, not grand attempts at synthesis on the basis of inadequate information. Third, I am describing attitudes towards mourning more than actual feelings of bereavement:

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what people believed they should feel and the reasons why they felt it necessary to control or suppress their feelings.¹ Attitudes towards feelings and the feelings themselves are, of course, intimately related, and one of the crucial factors which determine the course of mourning is the attitude which the bereaved hold towards the emotions in general and grief in particular. Fourth, the increasing tolerance of mourning does not mean that people felt less sorrow and distress at the deaths of their loved ones in the sixteenth century. The existence of so many instructions for letters of consolation and of so many religious and moral strictures suggests that mourning seriously disturbed large numbers of people. It is hard to believe that so much anxiety about mourning arises unless people *are* mourning. What changed was the ability to live with the process of mourning in oneself and in others.²

What does this change in attitude towards mourning have to do with elegy? For most of the sixteenth century poets are anxious about the mourning contained in their poems and often express sorrow only to turn upon themselves for indulging in it, but towards the end of the century defensiveness about mourning becomes less pressing and persistent, and this self-abusing reversal ceases to be so common. An ideal of personal expression of grief begins to replace critical self-restraint, and one occasionally finds simple and direct expressions of loss instead of wildly hyperbolic grief. The history of elegy from Surrey to Milton reveals the same shift in attitude towards mourning as do the letter-writing treatises and the moral-theological tracts. In fact, some of the evidence from elegy is earlier and stronger, and the popularity of elegy as a form occurs at the very time that attitudes towards mourning are relaxing.³

Chapter 4, through an examination of several collections of elegies, both Latin and English, traces the shift in elegy from 1551 to 1638, the year of the first publication of 'Lycidas', but a characterization of the poems of the five major elegists treated in chapters 5 to 7 will provide a more dramatic sketch of the development of elegy. My interpretations of these poets focus on expression of grief, from the conflicts arising from Jonson's blocked mourning to the simple, uninhibited sorrow of King's 'Exequy'. I focus on the ways that poets express or avoid expressing grief in full awareness that many of them are not personally grieving. Scores of poets who have little or no personal

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attachment to the subjects of their elegies choose to write as if personally grieving instead of restricting themselves to encomium, an option which remains available throughout the period. Their grieving verse presents an image of what they consciously or unconsciously feel to be appropriate mourning and appropriate funeral poetry and thus helps to chart the development of Renaissance elegy. Even though an ideal of sincerity in elegy arises towards the end of the sixteenth century, as one can see from the frequent attacks on artificial grief, the issue of sincerity is not as important as what are perceived as the feelings a bereaved person should have and how these feelings are expressed in verse.

Surrey has considerable difficulty when he tries to express sorrow, and his elegy becomes awkward when he makes a transition from praise of the deceased to his own feelings. He circumvents this difficulty in his most successful elegy, 'So crewell prison', by allowing lament for his dead friend to emerge almost spontaneously in a meditation on two different periods of residence in Windsor Castle. Spenser wrestles with the moral problem of grief which occupies the consolers and theologians examined in chapters 1 and 2. 'November', as becomes apparent from the imitation of Marot, centers on a major dilemma of Christian mourning, the coexistence of grief and joy. In *Dapnaida* Spenser offers an *exemplum* of excessive grief, but no explicit condemnation of it. Jonson's elegy cannot be properly understood without reference to the severest theological position on mourning, which is presented in chapter 2. His elegy contains almost no expression of sorrow that is not at once rejected; some of the poems, in particular 'On My First Sonne', are especially moving because of a tension between contradictory desires to express and suppress grief. King's 'Exequy' is shockingly different from anything written by Surrey, Spenser, or Jonson. King achieves an intimacy of address and a simple expression of affection and sorrow that is unmatched in the period, although approached by passages in Milton.

What about 'Lycidas' itself and the abrupt movement from lament to consolation? How does the poem fit into the development of elegy and the change in attitudes towards mourning? Once one examines earlier elegaic reversals which repudiate the mourning which precedes consolation, the change in voice turns out to be not as startling as the gentle tone in which the

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consolation is delivered. 'Lycidas' is an unusually defiant poem, which challenges God's ordering of the universe, but the consoling voice that delivers the 'Weep no more' speech does not rebuke the angry questions which precede. The mature, even serene, acceptance of the process of mourning at its most disturbing is a major part of the greatness of 'Lycidas', and the originality of this acceptance is all the more striking for the earlier condemnations of grief. As for the transition from lament to consolation itself, Milton's imitation of Virgilian and Theocritean pastoral proves to be important, but not because Milton feels that mourning is pagan. Milton adapts the precedent from *Eclogue* 10 and *Idyll* 1 that the subject of lament delivers the final speech after a procession of mourners and the tradition that a prosopopoeia of the dead is a fitting conclusion for consolation. Along with a crucial convention from ancient hymns these adaptations allow one to see that the most sympathetic consolation in English elegy is spoken by the spirit of Lycidas himself.

The Psychology of Mourning

There are two primary reasons for invoking contemporary psychological theory in a study of Renaissance elegy. First, a comprehensive theory of the process of mourning makes it possible to confirm the commonsense view that elegy represents a form of mourning. Currently, the dominant scholarly opinion runs that elegy is the poetry of praise, a branch of epideictic rhetoric. Although it is undeniable that many elegies are no more than encomia, it is hard to explain why, if lament is essentially an indirect kind of praise, the bereaved are so frequently urged to give over their grief or why poets so frequently rebuke themselves for expressing it. On the other hand, psychological theory has no difficulty explaining the presence of praise in laments or the displacement of lament by praise. Even poems which are pure encomia are part of the process of mourning because idealization of the dead is one of the commonest occurrences in bereavement.

Second, if one remains within Renaissance views of the motives and purpose of consolation – a desire to help the bereaved by curing their grief – one cannot account for the pervasive recognition of the inefficacy of consolation or for the consoler's hostile tone. Although preceptors of consolation

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realize that the bereaved usually reject the customary barrage of reasons not to grieve and rarely take comfort from consolation, they continue, until the early seventeenth century, to advocate the same sort of attack on grief rather than something else – for instance, sympathetic support for the painful work of mourning. Since the Renaissance account of consolation yields a disquieting paradox – why cause pain if you know it will not be effective – one has to look elsewhere for an explanation, and contemporary theories of mourning provide the clue: for the consoler, in prose or in verse, consolation is a defense against the breakdown of an ideal of rational self-sufficiency.

The major controversies in the psychological literature concern issues which are not crucial for this study.⁴ To a nonspecialist, most of these disputes seem either terminological or ideological; agreement on matters of substance is profound. Mourning is the process set in motion by the death, or sometimes by the anticipation of the death, of a person to whom the bereaved is attached.⁵ In everyday speech 'grief' is a synonym for 'mourning', and some theorists prefer it as the technical term, but there are advantages to distinguishing between the two.⁶ I use 'mourning' to refer to a process and 'grief' to refer to an emotion, intense sorrow. This distinction makes it possible to realize that the condition first described by Helene Deutsch as 'absence of grief' is a form of mourning.⁷

The essential concept for understanding the process of mourning is denial.⁸ Mourning, in the words of Martha Wolfenstein, is a 'painful and protracted struggle to acknowledge the reality of the loss'.⁹ The stages of mourning represent the development of this acknowledgment at the expense of the desire to deny the loss. Unresolved mourning represents the triumph of denial; the bereaved clings to the dead to avoid conflicts of guilt and self-reproach or suppresses grief as if no loss had taken place.

Since the major types of unresolved mourning are exaggerations, prolongations, or delays of the stages of mourning, let us consider the stages first. They do not form a linear progression, but overlap to a certain extent, and an individual may oscillate from one to another. It is difficult to assign periods of time to any stages except the first, as so much depends on circumstances of bereavement such as the nature of the relationship with the deceased, the kind of death, the bereaved's age, personality, and attitude towards the emotions.

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The first stage is numbing. It usually begins shortly after the bereaved learns that death has occurred, and may last as long as a week. Outright disbelief of the death is a common response. Normal behavior may continue automatically as if nothing had happened, or violent and sudden outbursts of distress and anger may interrupt the numbness. Numbing serves as a psychological buffer which allows the loss to be absorbed gradually.¹⁰

In numbing the loss is often explicitly denied or disputed; feeling freezes to avoid something which might overwhelm. In the second stage, yearning and searching, the loss is recognized intellectually and is beginning to be accepted emotionally, while at the same time the bereaved behaves as if the dead could be recovered. Yearning can last for months, sometimes years.

In this stage the bereaved intensely longs for and is preoccupied with the dead, relives in memory events leading up to the death, loses interest in people and things that used to be enjoyable, sobs, cries aloud, breaks into tears, wanders about restlessly, suffers from insomnia, or has fits of anger. This stage is characterized by outbursts of distress and anxiety and can be the most alarming to the bereaved because they may fear they are on the verge of breakdown. Many adults share the feelings of a nine-year-old boy who

vividly evoked the awful prospect of unstoppable grief that would overwhelm children if they were not able to 'forget' about a painful loss: 'They would cry and cry. They would cry for a month and not forget it. They would cry every night and dream about it, and the tears would roll down their eyes and they wouldn't know it.'¹¹

Particularly alarming, both to the bereaved and to those who try to comfort them, are the strong, apparently unmotivated outbursts of anger which come from 'nowhere'.

Some anger after a death is usually directed at the deceased for abandoning the bereaved, even though many adults will not admit, either to themselves or to others, that they feel such an emotion.¹² Some anger results from the frustration of the search for the lost object. Anger is often directed at people held responsible for the death, and comforters are often greeted with anger, since even if the consoler is sympathetic, part of the bereaved wants to recover the lost person rather than be reminded of the death. One must insist upon anger as a reaction to death because this emotion is usually just as important in mourning as

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sorrow, although not nearly as widely recognized: various kinds of anger often occur in Renaissance elegy.

A certain amount of ambivalence characterizes all strong attachments. Since it is normal to be angry at the deceased for desertion, death tends to exacerbate ambivalent feelings. A common way to handle them is to split off the positive and negative components. The deceased is idealized, and anger is directed towards someone else or towards the self, in which case guilt is the result. The greater frequency and intensity of guilt in abnormal mourning often correspond to a greater degree of ambivalence, although the bereaved can feel guilty for surviving or for imaginary or real responsibility for the death.

Yearning is the emotional counterpart of searching for the lost object, and much of the behavior of the bereaved becomes comprehensible once one realizes the powerful wish to recover the dead and the searching which it initiates. The restless wandering of this stage is not aimless after all; its goal is to find the lost person. Searching explains the phenomenon of being mysteriously drawn to or consciously revisiting places frequented by the dead, as in Hardy's poems on the death of his first wife.

During the third stage of mourning, despair and disorganization, a decrease in yearning and anger indicates that acceptance of loss is increasing, as repeated frustrations of the search for the dead drive home the finality of loss.¹³ As unconscious hope in the possibility of recovery dies away, memories which have been spurring the bereaved to search for the deceased tend to produce a passive sadness. In this stage a sense of the continuous presence of the dead may replace the wish for recovery. The bereaved may feel the lost person a perpetual companion or imagine him or her in an appropriate place such as the grave or a favorite chair. The bereaved may feel that he or she has become more like the dead or even that the dead is somehow within.

During the final stage of mourning, recovery and reorganization, emotional acceptance of the death is nearing completion. The bereaved may become free to form new attachments, although this depends greatly on circumstances. The old attachment, however, does not disappear. As Freud wrote to Ludwig Binswanger in 1929,

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never

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find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And, actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.¹⁴

All writers on the subject regard unresolved mourning as an exaggeration or abbreviation of aspects of normal mourning. The two major variants of abnormal mourning are extensions of different stages: absence of grief prolongs and exaggerates numbing, while chronic mourning extends the second and third stages, yearning and despair. These two variants sometimes combine. A long period of numbing may yield to a long and incapacitating period of chronic mourning. In both variants denial of the loss is hindering its acceptance.

In absence of grief the bereaved appear to be unaffected by the death, which does not greatly disrupt their life. People who suffer from this condition tend to be proud of their self-reliance and of their control over their emotions, which they often consider weaknesses. They will almost surely view tears as evidence of weakness and are probably afraid of emotional breakdown. They may already be incapable of feeling or become so if they cannot feel and understand their loss. Their condition is particularly unfortunate because it may easily escape the attention of others, who believe that recovery is taking place. In fact, others may encourage suppression of grief, because grief usually upsets those who witness it. The condition is usually unhealthy because suppressed grief disturbs the bereaved's life in some seemingly mysterious way: for example, compulsive caretaking of others, or hysterical symptoms of the illness which caused the death. More commonly the bereaved becomes depressed without knowing why or feels that relations with others are hollow and unsatisfying.

Chronic mourning is much easier to identify than absence of grief because the characteristics of normal grief are prolonged and exaggerated. Anger, often accompanied by self-reproach and guilt, persists intensely. Despair gives no sign of ending, and the bereaved's life does not become reorganized. Thoughts of suicide are common; some successful attempts occur. Wishing to win back the dead, the sufferer may preserve everything the way it was before the death or may unconsciously recreate relations with another that try to duplicate those with the deceased in an effort to undo the death.

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Any attempt to understand why one person is able to work through the stages of mourning to recovery and why another is not must take into consideration a wide range of factors. Besides the nature of the relationship with the deceased and the kind of death, the most important factor is the bereaved's personality and the experiences which have molded it. People likely to suffer from disordered mourning usually have personalities disposed to form anxious and ambivalent relations, to take compulsive care of others, or to assert independence of emotional ties. The second two types of personality try to deny the importance of their own emotions. They submerge their own needs and feelings in the care they bestow on others or do not let themselves become attached. These people are not in touch with their feelings, which they are likely to view with suspicion, and hold to an inflexible standard of self-control. In short, one of the most important factors determining the course of a bereavement is the attitude which the bereaved has towards the emotions in general and in particular towards grief and the process of mourning itself. A clear conception of the attitudes towards grief in Renaissance England is important for understanding the feelings which bereaved individuals were likely to experience and the expression of those feelings in the elegy of the period.