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978-0-521-81489-8 - Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England

Patricia Phillippy

Excerpt

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To mark the death of Falstaff, Shakespeare's *Henry V* pauses briefly for an elegiac scene in which Pistol both expresses his particularly masculine grief over the loss of the knight, and convenes a community of male mourners to lament him:

No; for my manly heart doth ern.
Bardolph, be blithe; Nym, rouse thy vaunting veins;
Boy, bristle thy courage up; for Falstaff he is dead,
And we must ern therefore.¹

Pistol's view of mourning as a product of the manly heart and his catalogue of the unexpected characteristics required of male mourners to perform the rite to which he calls them (blitheness, vaunting veins, and courage) are typical of a consistently gendered treatment of mourning, its affects, and its emblems in post-Reformation England, in which feminine lament is devalued, redefined, and circumscribed in ways that "contribute to new definitions of manhood."² Sixteenth and seventeenth-century death manuals, representational forms, and cultural practices revised women's long association with ritualistic acts of mourning to portray feminine sorrow as excessive, violent, and immoderate, while representing men's grief – both stoic and short-lived – as correcting and improving upon "wivishe" mourning.³ Abraham Darcie's memorable rhyme, "No sorrow, is a signe of brutish state, / But yet too much proves one effeminate,"⁴ summarizes the gendering of grief frequently put forth by early modern writers. As Juliana Schiesari has argued, this censure of immoderate grief as effeminate is part of "the Renaissance assault on mourning, and particularly on mourning insofar as it took place as a collective women's ritual."⁵ To counterbalance the long history of religious representations of the three Maries mourning for Christ (including their embodiment in medieval liturgical dramas),⁶ Pistol gives us a secular, masculine group of mourners engaged in collective sorrow for the

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incongruous passing of the Henriad's preternaturally robust ("Give me life!")⁷ Falstaff.

If Pistol's staging of a male *pietà* rewrites the gendering of an earlier, popular tradition of women's collective ritual lament, however,⁸ the scene goes on to offer *not* the masculine performance of mourning, but the feminine report of the deathbed itself. In doing so, it marks the movement from the public acknowledgment of death, enacted through male lament, to death's occurrence as a semi-private affair located within a domestic sphere over which women preside.⁹ Mistress Quickly, the female attendant upon and witness to Falstaff's final illness and death, describes his demise as an *exemplum* of the Protestant "good death," complete with a deathbed recantation (of sack, if not of women):

'A made a finer end, and went away and it had been any christom child. 'A parted ev'n just between twelve and one, ev'n at the turning of the tide; for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his finger's end, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a [babbled] of green fields. 'How now, Sir John? quoth I, "what, man? be 'a good cheer." So 'a cried out, 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hop'd there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So 'a bade me lay more clothes on his feet. I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and so up'ard and up'ard, and all was as cold as any stone.¹⁰

The specific nature of the Hostess's attendance on Falstaff is clearly subject to censure when read in light of the decorum governing the behaviors of both dying Christians and those who comfort them, frequent topics of early modern treatises on the art of death. Miles Coverdale's 1555 translation of Otto Werdmuller's *ars moriendi*, for example, numbers among the works of mercy "to visit the sick, to have compassion upon them, to give them good counsaile, and to comfort them."¹¹ Deathbed attendants must exhort the dying Christian to "turne . . . for Goddes sake from all creatures, to [his] creator and maker," lead him to a confession of sins, and pray for the soul of the dying.¹² While the Hostess's attempt to comfort Falstaff by urging him *not* to turn to his creator displays a bittersweet disregard for the wisdom of post-Reformation advisers on death, the fact of her attendance on the body in death, like Pistol's "erning," responds to the gendering of early modern death ritual and lament which ascribed to women not only the task of attending the dying, but also the "menial and gendered" work required to prepare the body for disposal.¹³ Thus the wills of widowers and bachelors frequently

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leave sums to landladies or hostesses for assisting them during their final sickness and death: John Stayworthe of Pagelsham (d. 1562), for example, leaves 12d “to Fanner’s wife my keeper;” and John Wyncome of Saffron Walden (d. 1563) similarly bequeaths goods “to my hostess Agnes wife of Richard Prowe.”¹⁴

Economic and literary evidence such as this points toward the unpaid work of attending and mourning the dying and the dead performed by women within households – work which placed them collectively, prior to the initiation of any public acts of mourning, in a uniquely intimate relationship with the body of death. This relationship, and the cultural currents informing, describing, and defining it, comprise the subject of this book. By examining early modern funerary, liturgical, and lamentational practices, diaries, poems, plays, and instructional and consolatory works on death and dying, I illustrate the consistent gendering of rival styles of grief in post-Reformation England and, conversely, the period’s constructions of male and female subjects (both textual and cultural) as predicated upon gendered approaches to death. The chapters that follow argue that while feminine grief is condemned as immoderately emotional by male reformers, the same characteristic that opens women’s mourning to censure enables its use as a means of authorizing and empowering women’s speech.

By engaging both material and representational aspects of the topic, I mean, on the one hand, to ground images of women’s grief in the work they performed in carrying out the rituals that attended the demise of the physical body. This recovery and documentation of the material practices of early modern women’s mourning offer new and valuable insights into an aspect of post-Reformation culture that has been largely overlooked. On the other hand, I explore the ideological functions of images of women’s mourning in early modern England to describe the cultural work performed by these characterizations of female grief. Based on archival research as well as textual reflections of the face of early modern death, this study reconstructs the variety and extent of women’s lamentational practices in the period and explores the different inflections given to gendered grief within male and female-authored texts.¹⁵ Since early modern women’s intimacy with death’s materiality characterizes them as empathetically *physical* mourners, I am concerned not only with images of feminine lamentation but also with the period’s treatments of the female body in death; for example in discussions and deployments of the art of embalming, male-authored narratives of women’s deathbed performances, and the active polemical afterlife of Elizabeth I’s royal corpse.

My treatment of works by women including Aemilia Lanyer, Anne de Vere, Mary Carey, Katherine Philips, Elizabeth Russell, Rachel Speght, Alice Sutcliffe, and Isabella Whitney clearly illustrates the widespread interest of early modern women in the matter of death and suggests the material practices lying behind their encounters with it.

Despite an impressive number of recent historical, literary and cultural studies devoted to early modern death and mourning,¹⁶ little attention has been paid to women's crucial roles, both literal and figurative, either in the period's changing lamentational practices or in its highly gendered formulations of the nature and meaning of grief. This oversight is unfortunate, since ample historical evidence shows that, prior to the appearance of professional undertakers in the late seventeenth century,¹⁷ women were the most frequent and most immediate attendants on bodies in death, carrying out the tasks of caring for the dying, washing and winding the corpse, watching the body during its period of laying-out, conducting ritual lamentations within the home, serving as almsfolk and mourners for funerals, and donning mourning garments according to cultural rules of relation and class. Moreover, a surprisingly large number of texts written by early modern women concern themselves explicitly with the matter of death and bespeak not only women's widely-perceived intimacy with death's physical ravishments¹⁸ but also the unusual license to write and publish afforded to women in proximity to death – from lamenting wives and mothers, to women who speak with the heightened authority granted by the deathbed.¹⁹ Approaching early modern literary works with an eye to their participation in the period's gendered culture of grief permits suggestive contextualizations of canonical works by male authors and familiar texts by women, as well as introductory readings of relatively unknown authors and works.

Throughout this study of the early modern gendering of mourning and its rituals, I engage the pressing question of the means by which contemporary criticism should approach the history of emotion, and offer a model for this approach that takes its cue from the affective structures emergent in post-Reformation English culture itself. Recent criticism devoted to exploring and theorizing the period's emotions has increasingly sought to historicize affect in order to refine our understanding of early modern subjectivity. As this project has unfolded in contemporary criticism, it has itself been gendered in ways that parallel the early modern gendering of grief. As Sarah Tarlow observes, "to express a past which involves passion, fear, grief and love is to risk one's own credibility, to appear soppy, romantic and weak. The emotional in our society is consistently

devalued. The associations of overt emotionality are with femininity, weakness. Emotional responses are held to be incompatible with proper rational thought and seriously out of place in an academic discipline.”²⁰ As ideological resistance to the project of constructing historical genealogies of the emotions has begun to relax, the pragmatic problem of identifying reliable forms of evidence with which to support this undertaking remains. In my discussions of textual and cultural gestures of mourning, I assume that individual subjectivity is always both created and mediated by one’s interactions with available generic forms of representation and self-representation. For example, Elizabeth Russell’s affective epitaph on the death of her daughters, Anne and Elizabeth Hoby, in 1570 (discussed in detail in chapter 6) insists upon the depth of her maternal grief at the girls’ loss – “eheu mea viscera,” she complains, “o my visceral pangs”²¹ – but does so through the conventional language of memorial poetry and in the difficult and technically restricted medium of the engraved inscription on monumental stone. If emotions are at once physiologically experienced and culturally conditioned, their expression is partially reflective of the individual’s interiority and partially determined by the conventions, including linguistic and artistic conventions, in which they are cast.²² The ceremonial practices and discourses attending early modern grief clearly mediate the direct expression of emotional subjectivity, while emotions are, at the same time, “shaped and evolved by the very process of expressing them.”²³ As such, this study describes the pervasive, commonplace figures and gestures employed in post-Reformation England to express grief, and attends closely to the personal nuances and inflections given to these figures in the hands of individuals, particularly insofar as these inflections relate to the subject’s gender and the period’s gendering of affective states.

This book responds to two recent, influential studies by Lynn Enterline and Juliana Schiesari which discuss, in different ways, the gendering of early modern mourning and melancholia. Both firmly rooted in contemporary psychoanalytic theory, Schiesari sees melancholia as an elite male affliction that displaces and appropriates female mourning,²⁴ while Enterline asserts that melancholic narcissism in male-authored works “disturbs the representation of a stable, or empirically knowable, sexual difference.”²⁵ Although both studies helpfully indicate that scenes of mourning enable self-conscious constructions of early modern masculinity, their assumptions of the congruity between early modern culture and psychoanalytic theory proceed, for the most part, without reference to the gendered culture of grief in the period itself, and fail

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to consider the cultural practices that suggest the period's discrimination between clearly gendered versions of mourning.²⁶ Contextualizing the matter of melancholia within early modern discourses on death and mourning indicates the overwhelming tendency of these works to describe insuperable grief as feminine and to feminize the male mourner who veers into immoderation. This book, therefore, supplements and corrects these studies of melancholic male subjectivity through a thorough reading of the vast literatures of early modern death and dying and, most significantly, through examinations of works by early modern *women* which not only deploy mourning in ways demonstrably different from those of male authors, but also begin to construct portraits of male and female subjectivity as rooted in the period's gendering of grief.

My insistence upon viewing constructions of gendered subjects in relation to the literary and cultural – that is, generic – discourses that enable them has significant implications for the project of recovering and reading early modern women writers as it occurs in my work and more generally in contemporary criticism. In interpreting men's and women's texts, whether intended for publication or not, I demonstrate that authorial presence is constructed and gendered according to the literary and cultural codes by which rival styles of mourning are also identified as masculine or feminine. Accordingly, I delineate the features of early modern formulations of gendered grief with which individuals, as readers and writers, interact, and seek intersections between textual and cultural performances of grief informing men's and women's voices within their works of mourning. Instead of assuming that the fact of a writer's sex has a necessary bearing on representation and self-representation within his or her work, I read broadly across a variety of discourses and genres in order to return the affective and gendered aspects of mourning persistently to the cultural practices from which they emerge. As such, my approach offers a corrective to critical discussions of women writers that assume the woman's voice simply as a by-product of an author's sex.

Moreover, I understand this historicization of gender as defining the features of both early modern authors within texts, and early modern bodies in death and mourning. To account for post-Reformation constructions of the gendered body of death, therefore, I accept Judith Butler's statement that "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature,' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts."²⁷ This book traces similar aspects of early modern grief, which, both in written documents

and cultural enactments, are assumed to be essentially linked to sex while they, in fact, work to construct through normative performances the sexes to which they refer. Thomas Laqueur's persuasive description of the "one-sex model" of gender identity expounded by early modern medicine, with its claim that "there was no true, deep essential sex that differentiated cultural man from woman,"²⁸ lends additional support to this view of the performative qualities of early modern lamentation and illuminates the quantitative gendering of grief in terms of moderation and excess, characteristics easily aligned with the period's constructions of sexed bodies. Butler's questions, "Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history or histories?"²⁹ are here answered in the affirmative, and reformulated to ask, "In what ways do the histories of (male and female) mourning also constitute the histories of the sexes themselves?" To provide an answer, the chapters that follow both assume and demonstrate the affinities between gender and mourning as performative acts that "constitute the identit[ies they] purport to be."³⁰ Construed in this way, cultural and textual performances of mourning offer points of contact between the gendering of authorial presence and of the body of mourning itself, while women's excessive grief, enacted as natural through the bodily gestures which constitute it, "become[s] the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself."³¹ This transgressive quality of women's mourning, which threatens to expose the structures upon which gendered discourses of grief and, by extension, gendered subjects are constructed, is a continual object of policing in male reformers' condemnations of feminine lamentational excesses, and a vital source of energy and empowerment in women's expressions of loss.

This book supports two complementary arguments presented in two main sections and anticipated by a summary chapter, on Mary Magdalene's post-Reformation career as scripture's quintessential mourner and her legacy in the culture of grief and in Lanier's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. This anticipatory "map of Death" serves as a template for the discussions that follow.

Part I, "Disposing of the Body," examines men's textual manipulations of the figure of the mourning woman and of the female body in death to argue that a nascent definition of Protestant masculinity in post-Reformation England depends upon a gendering of grief that constructs the male subject through his opposition to stigmatized feminine lamentational practices. Readings of the Shakespearean histories *Richard III* and *Henry VIII*, plague literature, elegies for Elizabeth I, and Protestant

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reports of the exemplary deaths of Christian women show how a variety of early modern masculine cultural, spiritual, and political discourses were supported by the casting of women's mourning (and the essential nature on which it was said to rely) as excessive, physical, and resistant to the will of God. Male reformers' rejection of Catholic spirituality involves a reassessment of mourning in which moderate, internal grief – that is, stoicism³² – is valued and construed as masculine while external demonstrations of sorrow are devalued and associated simultaneously with femininity and with Catholicism. While the Protestant approval of internalized spiritual and sacramental forms over the outward show of Catholic ceremonies has long been considered a distinguishing feature of Reformation spirituality, the highly gendered character of this shift has only recently been discussed,³³ and its implications for orthodox or sanctioned expressions of emotion by men and women have rarely been noted. This uniquely Protestant assault on wivish mourning conflates excessive feminine grief which unduly laments the body's demise with Catholic mourning, consistently stressing the continuity between women's mourning as an imperfect version of men's stoic sorrow and Catholic liturgical excesses as imperfect (per)versions of reformed ceremonies. As a result, the Protestant male subject understands himself *as* a moderate mourner.

During the Reformation, the relationship of the living to the dead underwent radical changes that influenced not only liturgical and doctrinal approaches to the afterlife but also affective responses to the fact of death. Medieval piety emphasized the continuities between life and death built upon the professed efficacy of intercessory prayers to influence the location of the dead in the immortal topography of hell, purgatory and heaven.³⁴ Based upon this faith, liturgical practices developed, such as the public recitation of the obits, masses for the dead performed at regular intervals commemorating their passing, and the elaborate apparatus of the chantries, which employed both clergy and poor men and women to undertake continual prayer to improve the soul's station in the afterlife.³⁵ In the wake of the Reformation, however, the outlawing of prayers and masses for the dead and dissolution of the concept of purgatory virtually redefined the relationship of the living to the dead and resulted in a widespread sense of powerlessness on the part of the bereaved to influence the fate of their departed and anxiety about the prospect of facing the suddenly final sentence of the deathbed. Wermuller is careful to point out, for instance, that all prayers for the dying must cease at the time of death, since “the soule of the dead, as soone as it is departed from hence,

cometh into a state there as prairs (if one would make them for him afterward) have no place, and are either unprofitable or else vaine.”³⁶ Isolated from the dead, the living sought new avenues for channeling their grief and new applications for the commemorative and liturgical practices now rendered useless to souls in the afterlife. Accordingly, funerary practices became increasingly didactic, encouraging auditors to daily remembrance of their last ends rather than seeking to aid the dead, while the post-Reformation collapse of the chantries led to new forms of monumental and commemorative art.

These chapters argue that the reformation of *affect* resulting from these doctrinal and ritual reforms occurs on clearly gendered terms. In the absence of corporate, active, external forms through which to mourn, post-Reformation grief is rendered individual, static, and internal by the acknowledged pointlessness of prolonged or repetitious commemorative acts and by the transgression implied by stubborn grief. As a result, male reformers stress the ineffectualness of Catholic lamentational practices by casting them as both excessive and feminine, while mourning in measure is the masculine expression of grief approved by reformed piety. The period’s “masculinization of piety,” which involves, as Carlos M. N. Eire argues, “a definite shift away from a gender-balanced, feminized piety to a more strictly masculine one” with the removal of feminine representations of the Virgin and the saints,³⁷ is here expanded to account for gendered approaches to death and mourning in post-Reformation England.

Part II, “Sisters of Magdalene,” takes up feminine responses to the Protestant gendering of grief to show that while male reformers stigmatized women’s mourning as excessive and violent, early modern women found in this acknowledged excess a rhetorical and emotional power to support their public and private expressions of loss. The demarcation of women’s grief as a particularly volatile emotional site, in effect, licenses women’s writing and publishing of textual works of mourning. The construction of a notional space in which the decorum governing grief might be temporarily suspended (despite men’s efforts to limit that space and restrain women’s behavior within it) authorizes female speech, itself often associated in the period with excess, incontinence, and lack of restraint.³⁸ Discussions of elegies and diaries by maternal mourners, of public funerary monuments commissioned and designed by women, and of female-authored examples of the *ars moriendi* demonstrate that early modern women consistently reinterpret and deploy unorthodox forms of immoderate mourning to support their textual expressions of grief.

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In doing so, moreover, they challenge the teleology of death and resurrection on which early modern discourses of consolation were based.

While I am especially interested in these pages in early modern women's mourning and its representations, I do not wish to suggest that *only* women mourned in the period, to the exclusion of men, or that women only took part in death rituals and acts of mourning privately while men performed the more public duties attending death and burial. Neither of these suggestions would accurately describe the role of gender within early modern approaches to death and mourning. Rather, an examination of the subject unpredictably complicates our notions of public and private spaces and the gendered work appropriate to them. While the rite of watching the body was most often performed by women within the household, for instance, Anne Clifford's diary account of the death of Elizabeth I names women as the primary attendants upon the corpse, but notes, too, that men as well as women watched the body during its laying-out:

A little after this Queen Elizabeth's Corps came by night in a Barge from Richmond to Whitehall, my Mother & a great Company of Ladies attending it, where it continued a great while standing in the Drawing Chamber, where it was watched all night by several Lords & Ladies. My Mother sitting up with it two or three nights, but my Lady would not give me leave to watch by reason I was held too young.³⁹

Certainly the death of a monarch – particularly of a female monarch – might be considered an exceptional case, one in which the household itself is a public forum, composed not only of the immediate members of court but also, more generally, of the nation of mourning subjects. It is, however, a case where the blurring of borders between public and private, always implicit in early modern mourning and funerary practices, is especially apparent. For the very concept of laying out invites into the domestic space housing the body neighbors and friends, members of the public beyond the household, who come to pay their respects.⁴⁰ Indeed, Philippe Ariès's description of early modern "tamed death" stresses the social orientation of the deathbed itself: death was a "public ceremony," he writes, "a ritual organized by the dying person himself, who presided over it and knew its protocol."⁴¹ Once the corpse left the household, moreover, the public rites attending burial did not fall within the exclusive realm of men's activity: both men and women took part in the cortège accompanying the body to burial and attended the funeral service. Margaret Hoby, for example, reports in her diary entry for August 6, 1601, that she "went to the church to the sarmon, which was made att