Man and woman, though of equall degree and qualitie, were borne in a different manner to their graves. Man was borne upon mens shoulders to signifie his dignitie and superiouritie over his wife, and woman at the armes end, to signifie, that being inferior to man, in her life time, she should not be equalled with him at her death.


In St Thomas’s Church, Salisbury, hangs a pair of monuments commemorating two generations of the Eyre family, erected about 1625. Each shows a married couple kneeling at prayer, the man on the viewer’s left and the woman on the right. One tomb depicts the couple alone, for they were childless. The other presents a row of some fifteen children neatly separated according to their gender; those who died as infants are represented in tiny shrouds (Fig. 5). Like so many other examples from early-modern England, the division between male and female is fundamental to the visual organization of both tombs, so much so that it even precedes the separation of the living from the dead. Gender is the most obvious characteristic of these effigies, determined by dress and placement. But does it have any meaning?

One of the basic binary oppositions of human society is that between the living and the dead. Social and cultural historians have explored the ways in which the living conceive of the afterlife, the relationship of the dead to the living, and the diverse means of commemoration in human societies. Yet how...

do the categories of ‘living’ and ‘dead’ relate to the dominant polarity of Western societies, ‘man’ and ‘woman’? In other words, in what ways does gender survive the grave and the separation caused by death? A key facet of gender history in the past decade or so has been the investigation of how the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ relate to other culturally constructed identities, such as race, class, age, sexuality, and religion, and in order to understand how these identities impact upon the lived experience of people in different historical periods and places. Patriarchy is not a simplistic system in which all women are oppressed by all men. On account of values attached to race, marital status, age, and so forth, women may even exercise power over men as well as other women, while patriarchy certainly does not empower all men over all women.  

Introduction to Funerary and Commemorative Buildings in the Western European Tradition, with some consideration of their Settings (Stroud: Sutton, 2002).

3 See especially Joan Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, American Historical Review, 91 (1986), 1053–75, and also Merry Wiesner-Hanks’s essay in the present volume.

4 There is very little historical scholarship on the gendered nature of the commemoration of the dead. Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey draw attention to the coding of grief in modern Western societies as feminine, through the association of intimate objects such as apparel with the dead, and the assignment of their preservation or veneration to women. 3 Monuments to the dead do not fall within this ambit, however, for in early-modern England they were for the most part placed in the very public space of parish churches and cathedrals. Nigel Llewellyn has argued that, as public objects designed to preserve social continuity through the breach created by death, ‘tomb design recorded and reinforced the distinctions between male and female as the guiding structural principle of patriarchy.’ 4 Women were therefore memorialized as mothers and as models of womanhood, whereas men, who might be described as fathers, were rarely singled out for their manliness but rather for their exercise of authority and the maintenance of the status quo. 5 Anthony Fletcher, recognizing the prominent positions occupied by gentry tombs, argues that they promoted the association of power with masculinity and defined masculinity in terms of honour. It was honour, represented in monuments, that articulated the role of men within patriarchy. 6 These scholars accept John Weaver’s view that memorialization reflected social order, which was in large part built around a gendered hierarchy.

The following analysis is a fresh examination of gendered commemorative practices, based on a study of some 251 monuments known to have been erected in the English county of Wiltshire between 1560 and 1660 (further examples from the 1660s and 1670s have been included to flesh out the discussion). While most of these tombs are short inscriptions laid down in brass on the floors of humble parish churches, they range all the way up to elaborate edifices complete with statuary, heraldry, and Latin elegies erected against the walls of Salisbury Cathedral. The people commemorated by these tombs fall into three groups in terms of gender and marital status: 137 monuments commemorate a man alone,
62 a woman, and the remaining 52 more than one person. Of the latter group, 32 represent married couples or ‘nuclear family’ groups of husband, wife, and children, while the other 20 include a variety of combinations such as mother and infant, groups of infant children, and adult siblings.7

I begin my analysis by comparing four tombs constructed in first half of the seventeenth century, two for women and two for men, to ascertain the qualities assigned to gender, and those elements which transcended gender. I then pursue a series of themes: marriage, death in childbirth, chastity, death in military combat, and instances where the hierarchy of gender was reversed. If tombs were indeed part of masculine honour codes, designed to reinforce patriarchal order, how were individual women and men portrayed by them, and how important was gender difference? At its heart, this study pursues the extent to which death transcended gender in its claim on both women and men. As the monument of Simon James (d. 1616) at Hullavington put it, men (and, presumably, women) should recall that worldly distinctions could not forestall death:

Serve God therefore whilst Thou hast Time
That Thou to Blisse at Length mayst Clime
Every Estate Lord Duke and King
Rich men and poor marke well this Thing.8

Jonathan Finch has suggested that gender division was starkly realized in monumental commemoration, where women were praised for private virtues, and men for public status. Women’s behaviour might enhance their status, while men’s status implied adherence to a certain moral code.9 The model of early-modern femininity one might expect to find in monuments is represented in the epitaph at Lacock for Lady Ursula Bagnard (d. 1623), the daughter and wife of Wiltshire knights, who died aged thirty-six:

Gods goodness made her wise, and well Reseeming,
discernd and prudent, constant, true and chaste.
Her virtues rare, won her much Esteeming.
In Court and Country, still with favour Grace.
Fayth could not yeeld more pleasing Faythly Blisse.
Blest w[i]th two Babes though death brought her to this.10

This inscription presents Bagnard in terms of seemingly feminine, personal virtues of discretion, constancy, and chastity. These deserved mention because they formed the basis of her reputation.

The tomb of Cicely Marshall (d. 1625) at Malmesbury Abbey, a large inscription panel surrounded by a decorated frame, adopts a similar strategy to Bagnard’s monument. Marshall’s epitaph emphasizes somewhat laboriously her character and domestic activities. She was not merely the wife of one Sir Owen Hopton, she was his ‘faythful, modist, and loyall wife’. Marshall had achieved much in her worldly responsibilities as a wife, mother, and manager of a household. The text argues that the full extent of her spiritual and personal achievements would only be revealed at the last judgement, when her ‘fayth, hope, charity, temperance, piety, patience’ would be proclaimed. The list is instructive: Marshall possessed the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) but not the full list of cardinal virtues (temperance, prudence, fortitude, and justice) that implied an authority to govern. Her epitaph concludes by drawing attention to the pious manner of her death in a form held to be ideal for both men and women. Intriguingly Marshall’s last words were in Latin not English, ‘Miserere mei, Deus; et Domine recipis animam meam’ (Have mercy on me O God, and receive my soul O Lord).11

In contrast to these two examples, the monument of James Ley, Earl of Marlborough (d. 1628) at Westbury is preoccupied with detailing his political attainments and lineage. Erected by his son and heir, Henry, Marlborough’s epitaph appears to confirm Finch’s argument. It emphasizes his innate mental ability (‘nature fashioned his character for solemn intelligence, and learning improved him’) and his careful discharge of his many public duties right up to his final years, when he was defeated by old age alone.12 Marlborough’s character is

---

7 The data on which this research is taken from fieldwork in Wiltshire, England, however details of the relevant monuments can also be found in Thomas Phillipps, Monumental Inscriptions of Wiltshire, ed. by Peter Sherlock, Wiltshire Record Society, 53 (Trowbridge: Wiltshire Record Society, 2000); John Aubrey, Topographical Collections for Wiltshire, ed. by J. E. Jackson (London: Longman, 1862); Nikolaus Pevsner, The Buildings of England: Wiltshire, rev. by Bridget Cherry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), and Peter Sherlock, 'Funeral Monuments: Piety, Honour and Memory in Early Modern England' (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, 2000). All places listed in this essay are in Wiltshire, England, unless otherwise specified.

8 Phillipps, Monumental Inscriptions, p. 118.


10 Phillipps, Monumental Inscriptions, p. 15.

11 Phillipps, Monumental Inscriptions, p. 100.

12 Aubrey, Topographical Collections, p. 405: ‘quem ad gravem prudentiam finxit natura, et doctrina excoluit (publicis usque ad devilem actarum Magistratus bene functis) senti confectus.’
further defined by the inclusion of statues of the four cardinal virtues on the tomb, commending him to the world as one fit to rule others.

Another prominent nobleman buried in Wiltshire in this period was Henry Danvers, the Earl of Danby (d. 1643). His large but relatively austere tomb was placed in the north transept of Dauntsey Church and bears several epitaphs including a poem attributed to George Herbert. The main inscription details Danby’s many military achievements in the Low Countries, France, and Ireland, then tells of his elevation to the peerage by King James. It concludes with his death ‘by reason of imperfect health full of honour woundes and scars’. The Herbert poem is a reflection on fame, death, and memory. It proposes that ultimately Danby’s ‘Fame, His Vertues, and his Worth shall bee Another monument for thee’.

Each of these four tombs promotes the ideal of the good death. Women and men alike were expected to be of good character in life and discharge their duties before death, whether in political office, courtly life, or the household. Yet there were subtle differences between the virtues ascribed to males and females, contingent upon whether those virtues were to be exercised. Women might govern their households, but did so through prudence and the theological virtues. Men, however, were ideally endowed with the cardinal virtues as well and therefore capable of ordering society at large.

For the gentry the identification of lineage, marriage, and the hope of posterity took precedence over gendered personal traits. Of course, marriage itself was one of the most gendered institutions in early-modern society. Marriage was the means of biological and social reproduction. In a society obsessed with lineage, a good marriage was one that translated honour and property from one family to another, and produced enough children to ensure those same endowments could be passed on to posterity. Tombs played a crucial part in recording these transactions.

One of the most striking images of marriage in early-modern Wiltshire is the tomb of Giles and Katharine Mompesson in the small church at Lydiard Tregoez (see front cover). The monument is situated amidst several others for Katharine’s natal family, the St Johns, and was placed above the family’s private entrance to the church. It shows the ideal companionate marriage: husband and wife are seated opposite one another under a pair of elegant arches. Sir Giles is depicted in armour as befits his knightly status, but his helmet is removed and he is reading a book. Lady Mompesson clasps a skull and is engaged in the noble art of contemplation, presumably on death. The tomb was probably erected shortly after her death in 1633, perhaps commissioned by her brother Sir John St John; the inscription identifies Katharine as his eldest sister, justifying the monument’s erection at Lydiard Tregoez. The epitaph claims that Lady Mompesson was ‘the best of women’ on account of her ‘beauty, constancy, piety, and all the most outstanding sorts of virtues’. It notes that Sir Giles was ‘an ancient family and had been made a knight. The couple were said to have passed twenty-six happy years together before her death. The text ends with an exhortation to the visitor to ‘survey the character of the dead’ and not to damage the tomb.

The picture of marital bliss between two learned, elite gentry that the Mompesson tomb constructs is deliberately false. Katharine Mompesson’s burial amongst her birth family reflected the only secure element in her marital life. Sir Giles, involved in several shady business dealings, was deprived of his knighthood by Parliament and banished from the kingdom for several years. He was only able to return to England through the influence of his St John in-laws and their connection by marriage to the Duke of Buckingham. The fiction espoused by the tomb shows all the more how elite values might be gendered, at least for women, who were virtuous and contemplative creatures, while masculinity was referred to more obliquely in the chivalric language of lineage and knighthood.

The complex relation of gender and death was registered with particular strength when marital relations were ruptured by death in childbirth. Men, identified with survival, grief, and life, were opposed to women, who died contradictorily in the only act that could bring a new life into the world. A significant group of tombs in the sample (as many as thirteen) commemorated women who died in childbirth or shortly thereafter. Husbands used this medium to express

15 Aubrey, Topographical Collections, p. 175: ‘Gaeminarum optimae’ on account of her ‘forma, constantia, pietate, omnipie virtutum genere praestantisissima’.

16 Aubrey, Topographical Collections, p. 175: ‘defunctorum mores perfide’.


18 There are nine tombs of women who died as a result of childbirth: Sybill Clare (d. 1577) at Twining; Judith Prater (d. 1578) at West Kingston; Gertrude Pile (d. 1630) at Collingbourne Kingston; Elizabeth Dantesey (d. 1636) at West Lavington; Elizabeth Eyre (d. 1637) at Bromham; Anne St John (d. 1638) at Lydiard Tregoez; Thomasine Benett (d. 1645) at Wroughton; Anne Lady Baltimore (d. 1649) at Tisbury; and Mary Sacheverell (d. 1652) at St Thomas’s, Salisbury. In

---

15 Phillipps, Monumental Inscriptions, p. 107.

grief at their and their children's premature loss. Many of these monuments looked to God's providence as both the explanation and comfort for premature death: the husband's loss was to be tempered by the knowledge of the wife's salvation. The grave of Gertrude Pile, who died in 1630 aged twenty-two, compares her to the biblical Rachel:

[T]his immate Death is her Greatest gaine. She being all faire within, and having continued both in life and death in faith, holiness, and charity with sobriety, is saved in childbearing. Her affectionate Jacob hath set up this pillar to preserve his name alive here, but he in whom she overcame, hath made him a living pillar in his holy mount never to goe out more — having lived in wedlocke about 6 years, and born Gabriel, Gertrude and William, of which the 2 last lye buried neere here about, she passed to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and yt fadeth not. 19

The claim that she was 'saved in childbearing' is unusual. Arguably it refers to Gertrude's death enabling her to proceed to heaven, rather than the act of childbirth somehow earning her salvation. What is interesting is the implication that her husband was not yet saved, and that he was left not only to mourn his wife, but also a tenuous genealogical thread to connect him to posterity in a single surviving child.

Elizabeth Danvers (d. 1636) also died in childbirth. Her memorial was placed in a long niche in the wall of the church at West Lavington. It presents the effigy of a young woman reclining on an elbow. Behind her head is her coat of arms, and the niche is decorated with three cherub's heads. The rear wall of the niche is engraved with an epitaph in elaborate Latin. In contrast to the cheerful, animated effigy, the inscription bemoans the loss of a perfect wife and mother. The epitaph praises her neighbourly kindness, her pure character, her constancy and modesty, and goes so far as to describe her as 'the archive and treasury of all virtues'. The text mourns her early death aged only thirty-one years, and describes how 'amidst the prayers and hopes of all good people (who desire it not), amidst her bitter mourning, and the cries of her infants, she breathed out her most pious soul to God.' 20

addition, four tombs represent women who died leaving young children whose deaths were probably related to childbirth: Ann Jeyde (d. 1612) at Fittleton; Ursula Bagnard (d. 1623) at Lacock; Cyscey Marshall (d. 1625) at Malmesbury; Anne Bailey (d. 1646) at Holt.

19 Phillippis, Monumental Inscriptions, p. 186.

20 Phillippis, Monumental Inscriptions, p. 247: 'virtutum omnium archivium, et aerarium [...] inter honorum omnium (qui nuncuti) preces et vota, inter acerbarus suorum planctus, et eulatus infantaria, pinnam animam deo suo efflat.'

John Danvers' decision to raise a tomb for his wife was not motivated solely by reasons of grief or the desire to memorialize a paragon of early-modern womanhood. Parts of the epitaph and the heraldic shield tell the viewer that she was born Elizabeth Dantesay, heiress of the manor of West Lavington, which passed to Sir John upon their marriage in 1628. The transferal of title was a significant moment in the life of the manor and the Dansey and Danvers families, and as was the case in similar instances, deserved to be commemorated. Thus, as well as denoting the sharpness of loss caused by death in childbirth, and identifying the virtues which made Elizabeth so valued, the tomb was a material expression of the marital transaction.

A similar complex set of motions prompted Sir John St John to erect a sumptuous monument for himself and his immediate family at Lydiard Tregoze in 1640. The presenting cause was the death of his first wife, Anne, in 1638, and the monument includes Sir John's effigy, flanked by his two wives, with Anne cradling a baby in her arms. (Both Sir John and his second wife, Margaret, were alive at the time of the tomb's construction.) The overall thrust of the tomb, however, is the St John family's dynastic and political success. The parents are flanked by effigies of their many children, while the tomb is crowned with elaborate heraldry and statues of the virtues. The epitaph on Anne St John subsumes grief beneath the inevitability of death for all humans as part of the natural order, and the hope of redemption indicated by the promise of angelic transformation. It deliberately plays upon the relationship of birth and death, and produces the gendered metaphor of the 'tomb' as 'womb' made available by the peculiarities of the English language.

God form'd a Mould of Clay which then beganne,
When he first breath'd into 't, to be a Man.
We raise this Pile of stone, and in its wombe
Laying that breathes Clay, make it a Tomb.
A Tombre so precious, that what here within
Sleeps for a while, shall rise a Cherubin,
In which the wealth of Nature's treasury
(More Beaute, Goodnes, Vertue, cannot dy)
The love and glorie of her sex, the best
Of Women, Mothers, and of Wives, doth rest.
First went the Mother, after her must doe
Father, and Children, and you [Reader] too. 21

21 Aubrey, Topographical Collections, p. 179.