REFORMING RITUAL: PROTESTANTISM, WOMEN, AND RITUAL ON THE RENAISSANCE STAGE

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My dissertation focuses on representations of women and ritual on the Renaissance stage, situating such examples within the context of the Protestant Reformation. The renegotiation of the value, place, and power of ritual is a central characteristic of the Protestant Reformation in early modern England. The effort to eliminate or redirect ritual was a crucial point of interest for reformers, for most of whom the corruption of religion seemed bound to its ostentatious and idolatrous outer trappings. Despite the opinions of theologians, however, receptivity toward the structure, routine, and familiarity of traditional Catholicism did not disappear with the advent of Protestantism. Reformers worked to modify those rituals that were especially difficult to eradicate, maintaining some sense of meaning without portraying confidence in ceremony itself.

I am interested in how early Protestantism dealt with the presence of elements (in worship, daily practice, literary or dramatic representation) that it derogatorily dubbed popish, and how women had a particular place of importance in this dialogue. Through the drama of Shakespeare, Webster, and Middleton, along with contemporary religious and popular sources, I explore how theatrical representations of ritual involving women create specific sites of cultural and theological negotiation. These representations both reflect and resist emerging attitudes toward women and ritual fashioned by Reformation thought, granting women a particular authority in the spiritual realm.
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INTRODUCTION

A central characteristic of the Protestant Reformation in early modern England was the renegotiation of ritual—its value, its place, and its power. This was not only true for Puritans, but was a crucial point of interest for all reformers, for most of whom the corruption of religion seemed inextricably tied to its ostentatious outer trappings.¹ Despite the opinions of theologians, however, the receptivity toward—indeed, the appetite for—the structure, routine, and familiarity of traditional Catholicism did not disappear, and England remained throughout the period of the Reformation a “ritualist culture.”² Although some Protestants could certainly have felt torn between a compulsion toward ceremony and a yearning for reform, the question remains of how much ceremonial residue and lingering ritualism Protestant theology would tolerate.³ How, in other words, would Protestantism deal with the presence of elements—in worship, daily practice, and literary or dramatic representation—that it derogatorily dubbed “popish”?

My dissertation deals with representations of women and ritual on the Renaissance stage. In order to have a distinctive and contributive voice in the current scholarly dialogue regarding the religious terrain of early modern England, I have brought to the forefront the unique position of women, both spiritually and socially, and their particular relationship to ritual throughout the period of English Reformation. I explore how theatrical representations of ritual involving women create specific sites of cultural and theological negotiation, both reflecting and resisting emerging attitudes towards women and ritual fashioned by Reformation thought. Some of the

³ Ibid., 5.
governing scholarship in this area of literary studies addresses Reformation issues within
dramatic literature; however, the repercussions of the Reformation upon women, specifically on
their shifting roles and responsibilities due to changing views of ritualism, have yet to be fully
explored.4 Additionally, the intersection of the two—drama and women in the wake of the
Reformation—has received little attention.5 This project builds upon the conventional wisdom
of the great body of scholarship available in this area and ventures beyond it by addressing
specific instances in the drama of women and ritual against the backdrop of Reformation
revisionism.

In any discussion of something as expansive as the “Protestant Reformation,” an
immediately obvious challenge is the definition and use of terms in such a way that they are not
unnecessarily reductive. To this end, Patrick Collinson notes the trend in current scholarship to
“demote the Reformation to lowercase and to pluralize it”: “many reformations” in many times
and places as opposed to “the Reformation.”6 Although Collinson recognizes the “tension
between the Reformation as part of a continuum of history, and the Reformation as an
view as a sound assertion by Collinson accounts, in part, for my use of the same term in the same
way: that devaluing “the critical beginnings” of something most historians still believe to have

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5 Though Christine Peters in *Patterns of Piety* and Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), for example, offer thorough and informative studies of women in the Protestant Reformation, neither deals with representations of women in dramatic literature.
been “the Reformation” could be “a serious distortion of history.” The Reformation is best understood, as Peter Marshall points out, as “overlapping and interweaving” cultural, religious, and political conditions and events—“both an ‘act of state’ (or series of acts of state) and a sequence of religious and social transformations.”

The terms “Protestant” and “Catholic” present equally troublesome issues. As Claire McEachern observes, “English Christianity was not, even symbolically, a single person or place,” but rather was “phenomenologically dispersed,” constituting “a ritual practice, a political institution, a social system, and a group identity.” Discerning the religious identities of early modern believers is especially difficult because of the English Church’s emphasis on “outward conformity,” as Marshall and others note. It is easier to designate doctrines, approaches, or even modes of thought as “Catholic” or “Protestant” (though even these categorizations can still be tenuous) than to identify individual beliefs or personal practices as exclusively one or the other.

Similarly, in discussing female ritual in terms of “women’s roles” or “attitudes towards women,” I do not suggest what Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford call “a hypothetical monolith called ‘woman.’” While recognizing that “no single female narrative” exists that can sufficiently encapsulate “the disparate experiences of women from diverse social, economic, geographical, and ideological subgroups,” I make claims about early modern women based on the most prominent descriptions of and prescriptions for women found in contemporary religious and popular writings. This study explores the role of the early modern stage in renegotiating

7 Ibid., 8; 12.
the meaning of ritual as it pertains to women. I have used a wide array of both primary and secondary materials to situate my work in the relevant contexts in order to show how those theatrical representations of women’s rituals both reflect and construct Protestant attitudes toward women, granting them a measure of spiritual authority through ritual practice.

The opposition to ceremony as a means of conveying God’s power fostered the Protestant suspicion of ritual in any form. Reformers labored to diminish, if not eradicate, the intercessory role of the priest, to do away with certain sacraments and ritual practices while emptying others of their efficacy, and to convince humans of the depravity and desperation of their situation—to emphasize “the need for grace whilst denying any means to obtain it,” as Alan Sinfield puts it.12 Whereas Catholicism had portrayed the church as “a limitless source of supernatural aid,” Protestantism renounced the notion that the power of God could be controlled and channeled through ceremonial practice.

That outlook left the believer helplessly vulnerable to God’s mysterious and unpredictable will.13 As a result, according to Evelyn Tribble, “‘ceremony’ increasingly became a pejorative phrase (frequently coupled with ‘idle,’ ‘vain,’ ‘mere’).” Ceremonies that were previously believed to draw man closer to God were to reformers “impediments rather than aids to or means of grace.”14 This new faith prided itself in—even defined itself by—its utter dependence upon the ebb and flow of the bitter wrath and tender grace of an unfathomable God. Religious writers of the period seem all too aware of the fragility of the foundations upon which they construct their models of redemption and salvation. To adhere to early Protestant theology

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13 Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 77.
was to accept unquestioningly as “truth” a nexus of paradoxical claims, despite the seeming absurdity of their contradictory nature.

Since the notion that one could actually comprehend the ways of God was itself a contradiction, to wrestle with the problems of Protestant theology was not only a matter of doctrine and practice, but of epistemology. Indeed, the belief that “God’s inscrutable will should be incomprehensible to the fallen intellect” made the rationalization of God’s design and the intellectual study of his scriptures essentially problematic.15 One of the many biblical passages used to define male and female roles offers an example of the quandary early Protestant theologians faced:

For a man oght not to cover his head: for asmuche as he is the image and glorie of God: but the woman is the glorie of the man. For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. For the man was not created for the womans sake: but the woman for the mans sake….Nevertheles, nether is the man without the woman, nether the woman without the man in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, so is the man also by the woman: but all things are of God.16

The writer maintains that “the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man,” bolstering this claim by clarifying the purpose of each, but then says that neither man or woman is without the other—is independent of the other—in Christ. He further says that though “the woman is of the man,” the man is “by the woman,” then, as if self-consciously alert to the contradictory and tenuous nature of such a distinction, immediately qualifies his arguments with the standard indisputable statement: “but all things are of God.” If scripture itself is so full of inconsistencies,

it makes sense that those who study it might become comfortable in the rhetorical traffic of such inconsistencies as well.

The paradoxical nature of Protestant theology, promising yet perplexing, compelled its followers to a sort of bewildered submission. Perhaps most difficult to come to terms with was its representation of “a good and just divinity who damns the larger proportion of his people without their being able to affect the issue.”\textsuperscript{17} Such a theology must have stressed to the individual the solitude of his or her spiritual state. One was indeed alone in an unprecedented way: no intercessory priest, no efficacious sacraments, no tangible assurance of salvation. Without the church’s vast supply of reassuring rituals, the only comfort available to the restless religious subject lay in God’s grace, which believers hoped for but could never ensure, as Edward Dering explains in \textit{A briefe and necessary instruction} (1572):

\begin{quote}
Wee can never knowe howe we be discharged before the judgment seate of God, until such time as wee knowe our owne miserable estate, by reason of the greatnesse of our sinnes, and the horrible punishment which wee deserve for them.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

To “never knowe” one’s destiny was both a cause and effect of Reformation thought. It required blind faith without guarantee, theoretically invalidating those rituals which had previously been performed to produce assurance and comfort.

Reformers thus viewed with suspicion things said or done by man rather than God. Deborah Shuger blames the Reformation’s rejection of “all visible manifestations of present holiness” on the desire to “dislodge sanctity” from its current institutional embodiments in order to reinvest it elsewhere. There was a sense, as Shuger explains, through the general “anticlerical

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 11.  \textsuperscript{18} Edward Dering, \textit{A briefe and necessary instruction verye needefull to bee known of all householders...} (London, 1572). \textit{Early English Books Online} (Ann Arbor: UMI 1999- ) University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX. Qv. 21 June 2005.
and antiepiscopal sentiments of the Elizabethan era” that “the established church had forfeited its special sanctity.” 19 The reformers’ search for an understanding and practice of ritual that was neither efficacious nor empty must have, in the end, created much confusion for the believer.

The renegotiation of ritual in Reformation England perhaps especially affected women, whose former position as the keepers and enablers of ritual (and the privilege and prestige associated with it) had been lost. In many ways, Pre-Reformation women took on the role of negotiating between the sacred and the worldly, frequently performing rituals such as pilgrimages and intercessions, “acts designed to procure the wellbeing of members of the family.” 20 While women had previously been looked to as vessels of divine intervention, much like the Virgin Mary, Protestantism called for a radical shift in how spiritual women perceived themselves and were perceived by others. An emphasis on female piety—within the context of a woman’s designated role as wife and mother—was likely the Protestant attempt at redefining the role and redirecting the actions of women. Since reformers could not entirely eliminate ritual, however, their goal became, as Tribble notes, “to retain the unifying effect of ritual and ceremony…while challenging its status as magical.” This proved most difficult for Protestants who tried to preserve something of the goodness of a ritual that would “collapse neither into transformative magic nor mere memorialism.” 21

The theatrical representation of such rituals, rituals that are somehow suspended in the space between “magic” and “memorialism”—birth rituals, death rituals, and the rituals of parental blessing and confession—is the subject of the chapters that follow. Protestants wished to separate these and other rituals from the good or bad outcomes they seemed to produce, yet

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could not simply reduce their status to representation or dumbshow. Extracting holiness, as it were, from various arenas in which it had always been understood to exist fits well with the reformers’ efforts to demystify rituals and ceremonies and, as Collinson points out, is reflected in the period’s drama. 22 The stage was indeed a fitting site for the cultural negotiation of representation and ritual, signifier and sign, or as Michael O’Connell stresses, “image and word.” O’Connell argues that the logocentrality of Protestantism cultivated a “crisis in the relation of the image and word” that “could not help but affect theater.” Rhetorically, antitheatricalists linked theater to the ceremony of the Catholic Church, while reformers criticized “the theatricality of Catholic worship.” 23 The Reformation’s privileging of the written text necessarily meant the marginalization of the visual image, casting a fog over the already convoluted theoretical, theological, and material space through which theatre practitioners had to navigate. Since the early modern theatre was on many levels a locale at which meaning was both made and unmade, exploring theatrical examples against the backdrop of their social and historical context enriches and expands our perceptions of their significance.

What we see in the period’s drama is “the re-creation” rather than “the actualizing” of ritual, a fundamental distinction of both matter and materiality. The danger in the re-creation of such an event is always, as Stephen Greenblatt explains, that it will become an “evacuated ritual”; in other words, the performing of a ritual somehow empties it of its efficacy.24 If this is the case, it seems that the re-creation of rituals on the stage would be at once potentially hazardous and entirely harmless, ironically made influential by virtue of their supposed benignity. While this notion could explain why some rituals are scarcely seen on the

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23 Michael O’Connell, The Idolatrous Eye, 10-11, 15.
Renaissance stage, it also heightens the significance of those that are, troubling the distinction between that which is “actualized” and that which is “re-created.” Whereas to actualize a ritual is to endorse (on some level) its efficaciousness, to recreate and represent the same ritual can either affirm or subvert its power, consequently affirming or subverting the power of the ritual’s enactor.

The presence on the early modern stage of female ritual is often subtle, but there are theatrical moments in which the mere mention of these rituals could have brought to the audience’s attention a myriad of social and theological issues. These representations could be accusatory, suggesting that women were indeed more vulnerable to sin and the influences of evil than were men. Conversely, they could reflect what Patrick Collinson terms the “collusive” nature of female Protestantism—that a “kind of sublimated feminist assertion” was both “acknowledged and allowed for in a world of male-regulated behavior.”25 As the stage presence of female rituals emphasizes their importance, the conspicuous holes left by their absence are an indication of their potential power. That Shakespeare and Webster, for example, allude to far more rituals than they actually stage reflects the marginalization of female ritual in general; however, such references might also be a measure of just how embedded in the culture such ritual activities remained. Since the previous association of women with ritual granted them a fair amount of agency that was no longer deemed appropriate, allusions to or representations of these rituals would likely have drawn to the surface of the spectator’s imagination a time and a place in which such things actually happened—and could happen still.

The aim of the first chapter, “A myrrour of womanhood”: Protestantism and Cultural Attitudes about Women and Ritual, is to situate the investigations that follow in the appropriate historical, cultural, and religious context. By examining contemporary religious and popular

writings, this chapter provides an overview of early modern attitudes toward women and suggests that such attitudes are shaped by shifting perceptions of female piety. The reformers’ rendering of female spirituality as synonymous with domestic activity, for example, granted women a particular spiritual authority.

The second chapter, “Remember that you are a woman”: Sin, Sacredness, and Rituals of Birth, explores the impact of the Reformation on early modern female birthing rituals. By looking at the association of childbirth both with sin and sacredness, this section examines the precarious nature of rituals practiced in exclusively female spaces. Contrary to official Protestant teaching, references to childbirth rituals in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, Thomas Middleton’s A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, and John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi, affirm the association of contamination with childbirth in their reliance on pre-Reformation ritual.

The unique relationship of women to death and mourning is the subject of the third chapter, “Ah, who shall hinder me to wail and weep?”: Mourning, Memory, and Rituals of Death. In this chapter I argue that feminine mourning, in the specific forms of lament and memorialization, is both a source of authority and a realization of the self in Shakespeare’s Richard III and Hamlet. The final chapter, “For thee, oppressèd king, am I cast down”: Kneeling and Rituals of Redemption, is situated within the context of the Jacobean controversy on kneeling in worship. By looking at kneeling as it relates to the rituals of auricular confession, which is linked specifically to participation in communion, and parental blessing, this section demonstrates the power of female redemption through the transformation of ritual in King Lear.
CHAPTER 1

“A MYRROUR OF WOMANHOOD”:
PROTESTANTISM AND CULTURAL ATTITUDES ABOUT WOMEN AND RITUAL

The renegotiation of ritualistic practices in Reformation England especially impacted women’s lives, since many women functioned as managers of ritual. The Protestant attempt at redefining the spiritual role of women was an emphasis on female piety within the context of a woman’s designated role as wife and mother. The importance of piety to the Protestant woman cannot be overstated; as Christine Peters points out, “the pious activities of the wife, and of the female sex in general, are almost sufficient not only for their own religious well-being but also for that of the whole household.”1 This chapter, which will set the stage for the play readings in the chapters that follow, demonstrates that throughout the period of Reformation in England, female domesticity and female spirituality became virtually synonymous. To be specific, Protestantism figured female spirituality in terms of domestic activity, granting a woman a degree of spiritual authority through the fulfillment of her role as wife, mother, caretaker, and household manager—each of which required the maintenance of certain rituals.

The emerging emphasis on female piety challenged traditional views of women as weak and sinful because of their connection with Eve’s role in the fall of mankind, while also casting a vision for female holiness that did not rely solely on the Catholic veneration of the Virgin Mary. Joseph Swetnam, in The arraignment of leuud, idle, forward, and unconstant women (1615), articulates the common view that Eve’s transgression was proof of female inferiority in general: “she was no sooner made, but straightway her mind was set upon mischiefe, for by her aspiring minde and wanton will, shee quickly procured mans fall”; woman has been nothing but a

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1 Ibid., 10.
nuisance to man ever since, Swetnam claims. The emphasis on female spirituality in terms of domesticity redeemed women, in some ways, from the curse of Eve.

In religious discourse about the nature of women, alongside the negative example of the sinful Eve was the model of the Virgin Mary, long recognized as the prime model of feminine virtue. Juan Luis Vives argues, in his 1529 manual, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, that women ought to fashion their thoughts and behaviors after the Virgin Mary:

Not only must she not sin herself, but she must, as far as possible, be responsible for seeing that she is not a cause of incitement to sin for others. Otherwise, she will be a member of the devil, whose instrument she already is, not of Christ. They say that the Blessed Virgin was of such modesty and composure in her actions and in her whole body that if any lascivious look were directed at her, that loathsome fire would immediately be extinguished like a live coal that has fallen into the water, or as if some radiating force of continence and temperance held in check the perverse desires of those who looked at her and converted their feelings to her own nature.

Not only are women vulnerable to sin, like Eve, but they are likely to be guilty of “incitement for sin to others,” Vives assumes. By emulating the example of the “Blessed Virgin,” however, women could hope to achieve a level of “modesty” and “composure” that would combat sin—even the sin of others. Mary’s ability to eliminate sin through her “continence and temperance” is almost magical. With a “radiating force” she can change “the perverse desires of those who looked at her,” an indication of the power of female virtue. To Catholics like Vives, the Virgin Mary is not only a model for women, but potentially a means of redemption for all.

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According to traditional Catholic views, if Eve left women the legacy of sin, Mary granted them the prospect of sanctification; if in her transgression Eve cursed childbirth with suffering, in bearing Christ himself, Mary exalted the very act of childbirth; if Eve’s shame passed on to women the inevitability of being the devil’s “instrument,” Mary’s “radiating force of continence and temperance” gave women the hope of being God’s holy agent. Despite the Augustinian view that women cannot be thought to represent God’s image or reflect Christ’s glory “because God and Christ are male,” Mary proved that a woman could indeed be “Godlike and Christlike,” allowing for the possibility of using female metaphors to represent the divine.4

The sudden elimination of this option, along with the marginalization of the female saints, probably devastated the religious women in Reformation England. The demotion of the Virgin ensured more representations like Swetnam’s, associating women with the sin of Eve. Protestant theology, however, did not attempt to do away with Mary as a model altogether, but rather diminished the prominent position she had held in Catholicism, which, according to Frances Dolan, resulted in part from the “excessive power Catholics were willing to invest in women.”5 Reformers wished to reduce the “agency” of Mary to mere “instrumentality.”6 Like Queen Elizabeth, Mary was an exception to—rather than a representative of—natural and divine law.

In looking for an alternative to the alignment of women strictly with the transgression of Eve or the virtue of the Virgin Mary, Protestants would have found a model that better addressed the concerns of Protestant theology in Mary Magdalene: she emphasized the desperation of fallen humanity and inevitability of sin, showing the need for redemption by highlighting

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6 Ibid., 285.
transgression rather than transcendence. Christine Peters describes an image on the title page of Richard Hooker’s *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1611 edition) in which a figure she identifies as Mary Magdalene is “the emblem of the piety of the faithful.” Though Peters points out the difficulty in accepting Mary Magdalene “as a substitute for the Virgin Mary as an emblem of the Church,” she notes that the presence of such a figure is especially significant in terms of the reformers’ “emphasis on the abject sinfulness of mankind.”7 The redemption of Mary Magdalene restores to her, in some measure, to the purity for which the Virgin Mary was praised. Precisely because she is a less pristine figure than the Virgin, Mary Magdalene is a powerful symbol of hope for Protestant women. Although Peters further claims that such an image “could make nuances of gender appear trivial,” it is in fact the gender of Mary Magdalene that makes her a good candidate for the metaphorical representation of fallen humanity.8 In her weakness, her proclivity to wickedness, and her vulnerability to temptation—all traits associated with women—Mary Magdalene embodies the Protestant idea of human depravity.

The most prominent views of women in early modern England were almost always built upon religious grounds and justified by key passages of scripture. According to Protestant interpretation, the Bible insisted on the natural inferiority, innate wickedness, and moral and intellectual weakness of womankind.9 The official Elizabethan homily on marriage clarifies the supposed differences between men and women:

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7 Christine Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, 23.
8 Ibid., 6.
9 See, for instance, Genesis 3:16: “Unto the woman he said, I wil greatly increase thy sorowes, and thy conceptions, In sorowe shalt thou bring forthe children, and thy desire shal be subject to thine housband, and he shal rule over thee”; I Timothy 2:11-12: “Let the woman learne in silence with all subjection. I permit not a woman to teache, nether to usurpe autoritie over man, but to be in silence”; Ephesians 5:22-24: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your housbands, as unto the Lord. For the housband is the wives head, even as Christ is the head of the Church…Therefore as the Church is in subjection to Christ, even so let the wives be to their housbands in everything”; Colossians 3:18: “Wives, submit yourselves unto our housbands, as it is comelie in the Lord,” *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). All other Biblical references are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.
For the woman is a weake creature, not indued with like strength and constancie of minde, therefore they be the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weake affections and dispositions of mind, more then men bee, and lighter they bee, and more vaine in their fantasies and opinions.\(^\text{10}\)

The homily affirms the theological principle that woman is, according to I Peter 3:7, the “weaker vessel.” As woman is a physically “weake creature,” she is also spiritually and mentally feeble, lacking “strength” and “constancie of minde.” This passage exemplifies the popular notion that women were controlled by passion—“sooner disquieted” and “more prone to all weake affections and dispositions of mind”—while men had the supreme benefit of reason. The homily also implies the intellectual inferiority of women, who were “lighter” and “more vaine in their fantasies and opinions,” another common assumption of early modern culture.

The idea of the “weaker vessel” reinforced the belief that women required male regulation. Writers and preachers warned men to keep watch over their wives, who could easily succumb to temptation. Because woman was especially vulnerable to sin, man’s rule over her was necessary, as Edmund Tilney points out in *The Flower of Friendship* (1568):

> For in deede both divine, & humaine lawes, in our religion giveth the man absolute authority, over the woman in all places. And… reason doth confirme the same, the man being as he is, most apt for the soveraigntie being in government, not onely skill, and experience to be required, but also capacity to comprehende, wisdome to understand, strength to execute, solicitude to prosecute, pacience to suffer, meanes to sustaine, and

\(^{10}\) “An Homilie of the State of Matrimonie,” *Certaine Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches In the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547-1571)*, ed. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), 241.
above all a great courage to accomplishe, all which are commonly in a man, but in a woman verye rare.11

It was not only paranoia and the desire for domination that made men try to regulate the conduct of women, but also a sense that it was their moral and spiritual responsibility to do so. Man is given “absolute authority,” Tilney claims, not only because it is ordained by God or law but also because by his very nature, he deserves it—his masculinity makes him “most apt.” Even if the “divine & humaine laws” which grant man power over woman could be reinterpreted in the woman’s favor, the argument for her equality is made illegitimate due to a natural lack of merit. The woman who might match a man’s leadership qualities, like Tilney’s queen, is simply dismissed as being “verye rare.”

Certain characterizations of or attitudes towards women are true for early modern culture generally, regardless of Protestant or Catholic leanings. For instance, male writers consistently stress to female audiences the importance of chastity. Even though he is a devout Catholic, Vives communicates a view shared by Protestants when he calls chastity “the principal female virtue,” and asserts that:

If this is present, one need not look for others, and if it is absent, one should disregard the others… So with regard to chastity in women, we must consider that the chaste woman is beautiful, charming, gifted, noble, fertile, and possessed of every best and outstanding quality, while the unchaste woman is a sea and storehouse of all evils.12

For Vives, a woman’s chastity is not merely a virtue itself, but signifies many other virtues as well. Vives could mean that chastity is such an accurate signifier that the chaste woman is also inevitably “beautiful, charming, gifted, noble, fertile, and possessed of every best and

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outstanding quality.” Vives might also be saying, however, that a woman’s chastity is worth enough alone to make up for any deficit in other desirable qualities; that is, “we must consider the chaste woman” to have these virtues even if she does not. Conversely, “the unchaste woman” represents danger and transgression—she is “a sea and storehouse of all evils,” regardless of what other charms she may seem on the surface to possess.

The problem with male reliance on female chastity is, of course, that such a virtue can be signified, but never empirically established. To measure a woman’s chastity—essential in a world that had, as Mark Breitenberg argues, “constructed male honor as contingent upon female chastity”—men looked to those outward virtues which were thought to represent it: modesty, submissiveness, obedience, and silence.13 Many forms of early modern popular and religious discourse—plays, ballads, sermons, conduct books—assert the virtue of silence in a woman, and conversely, the vices of scolding and talkativeness.14 Shakespeare, for example, addresses this subject numerous times.

Though certainly Shakespeare produced some strong, outspoken female characters—Rosalind of *As You Like It*, Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*, Beatrice of *Much Ado About Nothing*, even Lady Macbeth of *Macbeth*—he often undermines whatever degree of autonomy such characters have managed to reach, and also repeatedly brings such representations into dialogue with his society’s assumptions about gender and silence. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, the bridling of Katharine’s “scolding tongue” most overtly shows how a woman

14 For an overview of contemporary discussions of female silence, see Christina Luckyj, *A Moving Rhetoricke*, and Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475-1640* (San Marino, 1982).
who “will be free/ Even to the uttermost as [she pleases] in words” poses a threat to patriarchy.15 The “stark mad” Katharine is contrasted with her fair sister Bianca, whose “silence” Lucentio identifies as sure sign of “maid’s mild behaviour and sobriety” (1.1.69, 71). A woman’s “tongue” should not “tell the anger of [her] heart” as Kate’s does.

Hermia emphasizes the connection between a woman’s silence and her virtue in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as she wonders how she is able to be so “bold” as “in such a presence here to plead [her] thoughts,” and knows not “how it may concern [her] modesty” to do so (1.1.59-60). As *Measure for Measure* begins, Isabella wishes to be sworn into the sisterhood of Saint Clare, which would entail a vow of silence of sorts: “When you have vowed,” explains Francesca, “you must not speak with men/ But in the presence of the prioress. Then if you speak, you must not show your face;/ Or if you show your face, you must not speak” (1.4.10-11).

When Isabella tells Claudio that Angelo will spare his life only in exchange for her virginity, she can not bring herself to articulate such an act: “this night’s the time/ That I should do what I abhor to name” (3.1.99-100). Isabella’s inability to “name” the sexual act recalls Lavinia’s refusal to utter that which “womanhood denies [her] tongue to tell” in *Titus Andronicus*. Both examples suggest that to speak “the word ‘rape’ is to participate in it,” as Christina Luckyj observes, affirming the connection between silence and virtue.16 Through her lack of response to the Duke’s proposal at the end of the play, Isabella is either being silent—a revised version of the vow she purposed to undertake—or being silenced, an interesting reading in terms of her forthrightness and eloquent speech earlier in the play. Marina in *Pericles* experiences the same end as Isabella; the eloquence with which she “spoke so well” in the brothel that she was able to

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escape is suddenly dissolved into speechlessness as Pericles gives her to Lysimachus to marry (19.120).

As these dramatic examples suggest, religious beliefs and cultural customs required women to cultivate meekness. Similarly, the *Homilie of the State of Matrimonie* advises wives to “patiently beare the sharpnesse of their husbands” in silence.  In *A Bride-Bush* (1616), William Whatley encourages women to use “few words, those low and milde, not eagre, not loud.” Accordingly, Lear describes Cordelia’s “ever soft” voice as “gentle and low,” which he says is “an excellent thing in woman” (5.3.247-8). Thomas Salter similarly praises what he sees as an essential characteristic of the ideal woman in his *Mirrhor of Modestie* (1579): “I would not have her…to be a babbler or greate talker.” Mildness in both the matter and the manner of a woman’s speech implied her consent to the social contract that defined women in subordination to men. Her failure to comply in this area, then, was a sign of rebellion that went much deeper than a garrulous personality.

A woman’s speech could lead to a negative judgment of her virtue and seriously jeopardize her reputation, which as Vives says, is so “fragile and vulnerable” that “it may well seem to hang by a cobweb.” Vives regards the issue as having rather weighty religious ramifications, again articulating a view shared by Catholics and Protestants alike:

I do not wish that a young woman be talkative, not even among her girl companions…

the custom to give praise to a woman for her ability to converse wittily and eloquently

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17 *An Homilie of the State of Matrimonie*, 244.
with men for hours on end is something that is welcomed and prescribed by the ordinances of hell, in my opinion.  

Teaching women to speak “wittily and eloquently with men” is not merely unwise, but evil, according to Vives. He seems to suggest that for “a young woman” to be “talkative” even with her “girl companions” will lead necessarily to transgressive behavior, “prescribed by the ordinances of hell.”

Vives’ suggestion—that talkativeness will result in sexual promiscuity—represents the inverse of a common assumption regarding unchaste women, who were often characterized in terms of their “unfeminine speech,” as Laura Gowing notes. Desdemona dies based on just such an assumption in Shakespeare’s Othello. Desdemona and Othello share in the kind of conversation against which Vives warns—Desdemona used to “devour” Othello’s “discourse” with a “greedy ear,” and he desires to “be free and bounteous unto her mind” (1.3.148-49; 264). What Othello perceives at the play’s beginning as signs of Desdemona’s love, he interprets by the end as assurances of her unfaithfulness. Desdemona’s capacity to speak and “devour” words indicates to Othello her sexual rapaciousness: “O curse of marriage,/ That we can call these delicate creatures ours/ And not their appetites!” (3.3.272-74). Just as modest silence was a sign of chastity, “rude, loud, seductive, mocking, or threatening” talk was an indication of lasciviousness. Gail Paster describes “excessive verbal fluency” as linked to the “liquid expressiveness” of female bodies, which were regarded as “leaky vessels.” A loquacious woman was deemed immodest, and as Mary Prior explains, since “modesty was strongly linked

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21 Ibid., 130.
with sexual morality…an immodest woman was an unchaste one.”

Others could read a woman’s true virtue by her modesty.

Religious writings called women to emulate biblical female models of modesty. The Homilie of the State of Matrimonie admonishes women to “print in their remembrance” the example of Sara, who submitted to “the wisedom and the will of her husband” Abraham not only in action, but even in thought. That Sara did not verbally challenge Abraham is not enough. Rather, the homily insists that she “was so farre from speaking any such thing, that it came never into her minde and thought so to say.” The homily eventually entirely conflates speaking and thinking: “But Sara neither said nor thought such words, but she kept herselfe in silence in all things.” Silence here refers both to Sara’s external expressions and her internal impressions. Works like the homily on marriage, which follows the dominant Tudor ideology, figure modesty in speech as a form of outward respect and of inward piety. To be obedient, a woman not only must behave properly, but also think properly. If man is to maintain complete authority, he must reign over words and thoughts alike. This insistent conflation of words and thoughts reveals an anxiety about the fallibility of words as indicators of subjection.

The idea that a woman’s thoughts could resist subordination regardless of her words or actions is reflective of a larger early modern anxiety about a possible disjunction between outward actions and the inner being. As Katherine Maus notes, an “apparently universal suspicion of ‘appearances’” that results in “chronic doubts about the adequacy of what can be seen” informs both dramatic and nondramatic early modern literature. An obvious example is Machiavelli’s famous assertion that a prince should “appear all mercy, all faith, all honesty, all

25 An Homilie of the State of Matrimonie, 243-5.
humanity, all religion” even if he is none of those things because “everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are.” This anxiety about the compatibility of outward behavior and spoken words with inner thoughts and beliefs was especially pertinent to considerations and judgments of the female sex. Edmund Tilney calls a woman’s “good name” the “flower of estimation, and the pearle of credit, which is so delicate a thing in a woman, that she must not onely be good, but likewise must apeere so.” A woman was thus in a perpetually precarious position when it came to appearance—she should “apeere” good, though such an appearance was not necessarily proof of her goodness. On the contrary, appearing good directly called into question whether or not she was good, since appearance was a sign that could easily be deceiving. Writers like Tilney recognized appearance as an unreliable index by which to judge reality, yet used it as an index nonetheless. Despite Tilney’s glorification of reputation, however, the example of Abraham and Sara demonstrates that for a woman merely to avoid ill repute by behaving appropriately is not sufficient after all.

In a culture increasingly aware of the difference between seeming and being, the special emphasis that developed on female integrity is worth noting. For example, Vives, speaking to “young women” as well as to “married women and widows, in a word, all women,” gives the following definition of virginity: “integrity of the mind, which extends also to the body, an integrity free of all corruption and contamination.” Vives warns that “the mind must be particularly fortified lest it be defiled…so that all the treasures of beauty of integrity will endure there, firm and unassailable.” The association of a pure mind with the beauty and integrity of the body is an ideal of neoplatonism, affirmed by writers like Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, who

praised women for their “divine splendor,” which outweighed men’s because “beauty, is nothing else but the divine light, and splendor shining through faire bodies, he certainly hath chose to dwell in… Women rather than Men.”  

Agrippa’s Catholic background likely has something to do with his veneration of women as “divine,” like the Virgin, though certainly neoplatonic notions account for his location of “the divine light” in the “faire bodies” of “Women.” Peter Bembo addresses this topic in Book 4 of Castiglione’s *The Courtier*:

> I say that beauty cometh of God and is like a circle, the goodness whereof is the center… And therefore is the outward beauty a true sign of the inward goodness, and in bodies this comeliness is imprinted, as it were, for a mark of the soul… The foul, therefore, for the most part be also evil, and the beautiful good.

Peter Bembo sees physical beauty as a material manifestation of transcendent goodness and as such, it must be authentic—it is “a true sign” and “a mark of the soul”—a view that invalidates the phobia of false signs, what Hamlet calls “show” or mere “actions that a man might play” (1.2.84-6).

Throughout the period’s literature, the status of women’s bodies indicates the status of their virtue. Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* offers an example of the connection between the female body and virtue in its presentation of the two-faced Duessa. When Duessa is disrobed and shamed at the end of Book I, Canto VIII, her physical appearance is described as nothing less than monstrous: “her misshaped parts did them appall/ A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill

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favoured, old./ Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told.”  The most hideous and unnatural parts of Duessa’s naked body are her sexual organs, the “secret filth” that has in old age replaced those feminine parts so desirable in youth. Her “nether parts” are labeled “the shame of all her kind,” and she bears physical marks of her beastly nature in elements such as a “foxes tail, with dong all fowly dight” and “her feet most monstrous” (1.8.48). Upon the knights’ bewilderment as seeing “so fowle deformed wight,” Una declares: “Such is the face of falsehood” (1.8.49).

Spenser’s portrayal of an aging female body as “monstrous” is especially interesting in light of his audience: the aging Elizabeth I. Despite Susan Frye’s claim that Elizabeth’s “active virtue, so often particularized as her virginity or chastity” protected the queen “from the normal aging process,” Spenser’s depiction of Duessa in a sense threatens exposure of the queen’s “face of falsehood.” Affirming Peter Bembo’s articulation of the neoplatonic idea that the “beautiful” is “good,” Spenser suggests that the best representation of chastity is a youthful, attractive—and still marriageable—body rather than one whose “misshapen parts” are “loathly” and “wrinckled.” The cultural connection between women’s bodies and their virtue might explain why Queen Elizabeth’s later iconography portrays her as a young and available virgin though she obviously is not. This is an example of “the face of falsehood” that was the source of a shared cultural anxiety regarding representation, especially of women.

As significant to cultural constructions of women as silence and modesty were submissiveness and obedience, both of which were perfectly performed only within the holy institution of marriage. Generally speaking, early modern views of women are inextricable from

early modern views of marriage, which play an increasingly important role in religious discussions throughout the period as a result of the Reformation. Contemporary attitudes toward women are difficult to discuss outside of the paradigm of matrimony. After the Reformation, even an unmarried woman was perceived in terms of her preparation and prospects for marriage, her potentially tragic or subversive state after marriage, or her anomalous and possibly threatening condition outside of marriage altogether. For the husband, marriage meant “autonomy, mastery… and the prospect of fathering a lineage,” while for the wife, it was “the major defining moment of her life,” on which her entire future—“social, domestic, and reproductive”—depended. In his poem “The Bride,” for example, Samuel Rowlands insists that marriage makes a woman complete: “Unperfect female, living odd you are,/ Never true even, till you match and pair.” Playing on the concept of “odd” and “even” numbers, Rowlands labels the unmarried woman “unperfect” and “odd.” She can be “true even” (even in number) or “even true”—that is, complete or authentic—only by obtaining a husband.

A Protestant woman’s service to God was both experienced and perceived primarily in terms of her service to her husband and her children. In fact, Clarissa Atkinson argues that in early modern England, a woman could “be a good Christian” only “through marriage and motherhood.” During the Reformation, marriage was a desirable state for most people, as Suzanne W. Hull notes. Marriage came not only to displace the notion of sexual purity as necessary to an elevated spiritual state, but became the only venue in which a woman could

37 Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient*, 53.
pursue the Christian calling for which God had created her: to be a wife and mother.\textsuperscript{38} The Book of Common Prayer, used in most wedding ceremonies, outlined these three reasons for the institution of marriage:

\begin{quote}
One was, the procreation of children, to be brought up in the feare and nurtoure of the Lorde, and praise of God. Secondly, it was ordeined for a remedy agaynste sinne and to avoide fornication…Thirdly, for the mutual societie, helpe, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity…\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

The first reason for and chief goal of marriage was, according this passage, “the procreation of children” and the spiritual upbringing of those children. That the “the procreation of children” was a primary reason for marriage was a given in religious belief far before the age of the Reformation; however, Protestantism asserted childbearing as the primary reason for woman’s existence—that is, the sole purpose for which God created her—with greater force and fewer alternatives than before.\textsuperscript{40} As Atkinson notes, the service of women through wifehood and motherhood “was glorified at the expense of all other female participation in church and society.”\textsuperscript{41} Additionally, marriage was a means of lawful sexuality, purposed “to avoide fornication.” The “mutual societie, helpe, and comfort” of husband and wife was also a benefit of the marital relationship, though the placement of this reason indicates its importance. The first two goals of marriage took precedence.

A woman’s performance as a wife directly reflected her spirituality. According to Vives, “a woman who would not spend her entire substance to free her husband from the least

\textsuperscript{38} Rosemary Radford Ruether, \textit{Women and Redemption}, 116-117.
\textsuperscript{39} “The Fourme of Solemnizacion of Matrimonye,” \textit{The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth} (1559; Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909), 122.
\textsuperscript{40} Rosemary Radford Ruether, \textit{Women and Redemption}, 117.
\textsuperscript{41} Clarissa W. Atkinson, \textit{The Oldest Vocation}, 201.
discomfort should account herself unworthy of the name of Christian, upright woman, or wife.”

Protestant expectations of wifely obedience and service were indeed consistent with the message of Christian duty. As David Evett notes, “from the first Pentecost onward the church has always understood that we serve God by serving our neighbors—that is, subordinating our interests to theirs. Service to God necessarily means service to man.” What is interesting, however, is Vives’ conflation of “Christian,” “upright woman,” and “wife,” as if the terms were synonymous. Vives’ merging of such terms is consistent with the Protestant view, in which the antithesis of the wicked woman was not the chaste maiden, but the “good wife.” A woman who rebelled against “her proper role” therefore ran the risk of association “both with Eve’s sin and with female proclivity to witchcraft.” Not to be a “good wife,” or not to be a wife at all, had serious spiritual implications.

Because a woman’s spirituality depended on her marital status, the female religious experience in early modern England was laden with paradox. Women found themselves on equal ground with their male counterparts at the metaphorical foot of Christ’s cross—Galatians 3:28 states that “there is nether male nor female” in Christianity, “for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”—yet still were exhorted to be submissive and silent. As Barbara Lewalski points out, “the radical implications” of scriptures like this did not find their way into social practice until the middle of the seventeenth century. Although “the earliest Protestants demonstrated a willingness to embrace the idea that women could be partners with men in the work of spreading the gospel,” according to Greaves—after all, devoted female followers surrounded Jesus

himself—“neither Lutherans nor Calvinists were willing to admit women to the formal work of
the ministry in the sixteenth century.”46 Fear and uncertainty—and no doubt an earnest desire to
follow God’s will—kept most women out of public ministry.

For both Luther and Calvin, who accepted the Augustinian view of women, the exclusion
of females from leadership roles and the expectation of their submission to men was part of
God’s original design. The fall of mankind distorted this prelapsarian design, however, and the
condition of women deteriorated from willing subordination into “coercive servitude.” As
Ruether explains, Saint Augustine held that male and female souls have “the same potential for
redemption,” but could be made equal only “when the created order is dissolved” in the
afterlife.47 Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing points out the absurdity of gender hierarchy in
terms of the shared spiritual state of both men and women: “Would it not grieve a woman to be
overmastered with a piece of valiant dust?—to make an account of her life to a clod of wayward
marl?” (2.1.51-3). Theoretically women were religious coworkers with men; however, they
could experience this equality upon arriving in heaven and not a moment sooner.

The case of Phillips Stubbes’ wife exemplifies the notion that only death could grant
women access to the same spiritual status as men. In A christal glasse for Christian Women
(1592), Stubbes expounds on the goodness of his deceased wife Katharine, offering to other
women what he calls a “rare and wonderfull example of the virtuous life.” Among Katharine’s
many virtues were her ability to suit her mood to her husband’s fancy—“If she saw her husband
merry, then she was merry: if he were sad, she was sad: if he were heavy or passionate, she
would endeavour to make him glad”—and her submissive nature—“she would never contrarie

1985), 4-5.
47 Rosemary Radford Ruether, Women and Redemption, 4.
him in anything, but by wise counsaile, and sage advice, with all humilitie, and submission, seeke to perswade him.”

Stubbes goes to great lengths to emphasize his wife’s piety as well: for her whole heart was bent to seeke the Lord, her whole delight was to be conversant in the Scriptures, and to meditate upon them day and night: in so much that you could seldome or never have come into her house, and have found her without a bible, or some other good booke in her hands…

Impossibly, Stubbes’ portrait of Katharine shows a woman who is wholly devoted to her husband’s will and wellbeing, yet wholly immersed in spiritual activity, such as devotional reading. It must have been a constant struggle for a woman to be at once leader and follower, to be expected both to protect her family’s piety and defer to her husband’s every decision and desire. In his opening description of Katharine, Stubbes proclaims that “whilest shee lived” she “was a myrrour of womanhood,” but “now being dead, is a perfect patterne of true Christianitie.” Death transforms Katharine’s spiritual status from the reflective or imitative (“myrrour”) to the representative (“perfect patterne”). That is, this transformation shifts the deceased woman’s role from stereotype to prototype.

That Katharine could exert influence in the domestic but not the Christian realm during her lifetime affirms Protestant theology concerning male and female spirituality. When, and only when, her soul has passed on to heaven, Katharine’s “virtuous life” can be read not merely as a guide for other women, but as an example of spiritual steadfastness and strength—indeed, as the “perfect patterne” of such. As Shakespeare’s Antony says of his dead wife, Fulvia, “she’s good, being gone” (1.2.126). Because of its clarity, death is the ultimate merging together of outward performance of duty and inward virtue. Women can be named “good, being gone”

49 Ibid., 2.
since their words and thoughts are altogether consistent only at that point. Othello’s desire for this sort of certainty explains why he must kill Desdemona—“yet she must die,” he says, “else she’ll betray more men” (5.2.6). The coldness of Desdemona’s lifeless body proves her purity: “Cold, cold, my girl./Even like thy chastity” (5.2.283). In such examples, death is the only means by which to ensure female integrity.

Through death a woman might become a “perfect patterne of true Christianitie,” but during her lifetime, she could at best be a “myrrour of womanhood” by marrying and birthing babies. Though the elevation of marriage reflects the depreciation of the commodity of virginity in the spiritual economy of the Reformation, it also represents the polemic that justified the oppression of women because of their sin in the fall. Ruether offers a summary of Lutheran theology on the matter:

Women must accept their present subjugated, painful, and limited lot as their just punishment for having been the instigator of the fall. But they should also be comforted that their main glory of childbearing continues… Even if a woman dies in childbirth, it is no matter, for it was for this that she was created.50

Through arguments such as this, preachers and religious writers rendered female subjection and suffering as “divine punishments, not as male injustice.”51 Even when it came to childbirth, the “main glory” for which God made women, popular cultural and religious thought figured men as active agents and women as passive receptacles: “the male is man of a superiour sexe, fit for procreation,” as William Perkins reasoned, while “the female is woman of an inferiour sexe, fit to conceive and beare children.” Perkins further claimed that because of this natural inferiority, a wife owed two duties to her husband: “to acknowledge and reverence him as her head in all

50 Ibid., 120.
51 Ibid., 121.
things” and “to be obedient…in all things, that is wholly to depend upon him, both in judgement and will.”

In other words, she must not only do what he says (“will”), but also agree with what he thinks (“judgement”). Along similar lines, William Gouge wrote in *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622) that “Subjection ought to be as salt to season every dutie which [wives] performe to their husband[s]. Their very opinion, affection, speech, action, and all that concerneth the husband, must savour of *Subjection*.”

Like Vives and other writers addressing the issue of modesty and speech, Gouge conflates behaviors with beliefs—a woman’s “opinion” ought to conform to the ideal of subjection as well as her “action.”

For Protestant believers, a woman’s attitude toward her husband was a crucial spiritual matter. Writers on the topic found no shortage of justifications for their conclusions; historical models, natural laws, and divine precepts all seemed to affirm the same principle. Vives had this to say about female subjection: “Not only the traditions and institutions of our ancestors, but all laws, human and divine, and nature itself, proclaim that a woman must be subject to a man and obey him. In all races of animals, the female obeys and follows the male.” Vives suggests, in fact, that wives are inclined not only to endure the physical chastisement of husbands, but to permit it: “she fawns upon him and allows herself to be beaten and punished by him, and nature has taught that this is the way things should be.”

Such reasoning, coupled with the belief that women were by nature dangerous and wicked, led many to justify a man’s violence toward his wife as a sort of natural and necessary instruction.

Certainly early modern Christians preached

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55 Scholars disagree about the social acceptance of domestic violence. Based on cultural clues such as proverbs and sayings—“A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree, the more they’re beaten the better still they be”—as well as legislation, such as one by-law which prohibited wifebeating after 9 p.m. to avoid noisy neighborhood disturbances, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford conclude that “men’s routine violence against women was the norm,”
peace within marriage, though their solution for wifebeating seems to have been a call to patience on the part of the wife rather than punishment of the offending husband. Although the *Homilie of the State of Matrimonie* addresses this issue specifically, calling wifebeating “the greatest shame that can be” to a husband, it yet reminds the woman who is the victim of such shameful beatings of her heavenly “reward” for enduring such persecution if, in the meantime, she can simply “be quiet.”

Masculine violence in marriage, though undesirable, had the effect of enlarging the wife’s scope for spiritual depth, if she responded as instructed: with silence.

In his manual on English huswifery, Gervase Markham delineates the early modern wife’s familial and religious responsibilities. The title in itself illustrates the merging of a woman’s spiritual and domestic duties:

*The English Housewife containing The inward and outward Vertues which ought to be in a compleate Woman. As her skill in Physicke, Surgery, Cookery, Extraction of Oyles, Banqueting stuffe, Ordering of great Feasts, Preserving of all sorts of Wines, Conceited Secrets, Distillations, Perfumes, ordering of Wood, Hempe, Flax, making Cloth and Dying, the knowledge of Dayries, office of Malting, of Oates, their excellent uses in a Family, of Brewing, Baking, and all other things belonging to a Houshold.*

Though it begins with a reference to both the “inward and outward Vertues” of a “compleate Woman,” the title indicates domestic actions rather than spiritual attitudes or thoughts. Once again, the woman’s inwardness must both reflect and determine her outward behavior. Markham

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Women in Early Modern England (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 128. In contrast, Keith Wrightson sees the opposition to the practice of wifebeating voiced by religious moralists as not merely a recommendation for, but a reflection of, their audience’s actions and attitudes. He further argues that although domestic violence certainly occurred, popular culture disapproved of “both the violent husband and the scolding, domineering wife,” preferring that either extreme be avoided in marriage, English Society, 1580-1680 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 99.

56 *An Homilie of the State of Matrimonie*, 245.
does, however, address spirituality specifically in the work, saying that the good wife “ought, above all things, to be of an upright and sincere religion, and in the same both zealous and constant,” charging her with the task of “giving by her example, an incitement…unto al her family to persue the same steppes, and to utter forth by the instruction of her life, those virtuous fruits of good living, which shall be pleasing both to God and his creatures.” Markham contrasts this “compleate woman” with many women who with a violence of spirit… drawing a contempt upon the ordinary Ministry, & thinking nothing lawfull but the fantasies of their owne inventions, usurping to themselves a power of preaching & interpreting the holy word, to which they ought to be but hearers and believers, or at the most but modest perswaders, this is not the office either of good Hous-wife or good woman.58

Although he conflates good “wife” with good “woman” as Vives does, Markham sets up as the opposite not only unrighteous women, but women who presume to participate in ministry that reaches beyond their homes, “usurping to themselves” a strictly male privilege. Within her limited sphere, however, Markham allows the woman both a great potential for influence and a heavy burden of responsibility:

our English Hus-wife must be of chast thought, stout courage, patient, untyred, watchful, diligent, witty, pleasant, constant in friendship, full of good Neighbour-hood, wife in Discourse, but not frequent therein, sharpe and quick of speech, but not bitter or talkative, secret in her affaires, comfortable in her counsels, and generally skillful in the worthy knowledges which doe belong to her Vocation…”59

58 Ibid., 2.
59 Gervase Markham, The English hous-wife, 4.
The idea that marriage itself was “her Vocation” must have been affirming to the wife and mother since the reformers’ decisive denunciation of monasticism and the evolving association of vocation with occupation had displaced women, who “lost the option of a religious vocation distinct from marriage” without gaining “an affirmation of their work roles in society as vocations.” It restored, at least in part, the “important status in the family” that pre-Reformation woman had held as the family’s “ritual specialist.”

The wife and mother became ultimately accountable for the spiritual development of her family, “where from the genrall example of her virtues, and the most approved skill of her knowledges,” they “may both learne to serve God and sustaine man in that godly and profitable sort which is required of every true Christian.” Indeed, many proponents of Christian humanism argued that a young child’s introduction to the “godly and profitable sort” of life began with breastfeeding, a significant part of education that only the mother could provide. In Atkinson’s words, women were given “breasts for a purpose and a penance.” That is, through motherhood women could help their babies to salvation even as they redeemed themselves. In this way, motherhood as a vocation granted women a great deal of authority.

Women who fulfilled their role as wife and mother engaged in daily work that entailed much ritual, despite reformers’ suspicion of ritualistic behavior because of its “popish” association. Early modern female submission reinforced male authority, female passivity supported male activity, and female silence fortified male speech. Ironically, however, the workings of a male-dominated milieu were made possible only through the diligent, practical,

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60 Christine Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, 5.
spiritually centered yet specifically domestic work of women. As Corrine S. Abate observes, “early modern women cook, sew, nurse, heal, feed, clean, discipline, sing, and sometimes read and write,” managing homes which could then easily become “crowded” spaces of “subversion, argument, familiarity, contempt, authority and violence, local meanings and unofficial knowledge, improvisation and ritual.” Frye points out that “the masculinist equation between women’s work and women’s silence” experienced “ongoing redefinition” through the communal activities of women. Indeed, “women’s work and women’s silence” were often seen as representative of one another, just as modesty and chastity were.

Though a wife’s performance of her domestic duties could have been seen as an outward expression of submission, it also granted her a level of freedom, autonomy, and expertise along with countless opportunities for discourse with female peers. Female togetherness—free of the supervision or intrusion of males—necessarily accompanied female work, which took place in what Abate and Mazzola term “indistinguished space”—“segregated, sometimes secluded, places for primarily female activities.” The idea of female-only congregation and conversation likely provoked male anxiety, perhaps with good reason. As Mendelson and Crawford note, “men could not know what women said when they were secure in their own space, free of masculine supervision.” Throughout the period’s drama, in fact, female characters form potentially powerful alliances with one another in spite of—because of—the patriarchal insistence on their enclosure within all-female spaces.

65 Corrine S. Abate, Privacy, Domesticity, and Women, 2.
Representations of some of the most memorable female relationships in the period’s drama show women navigating the realm of the liminal and surreal, perhaps putting to the test the bonds assumed to have been formed in private feminine spaces. Celia in As You Like It, for instance, says in her account of her relationship with Rosalind that the two “have slept together, Rose at an instant, learned, played, eat together” and were “coupled and inseparable” before their journey to Arden (1.3.67-70). Helena speaks of a similar relationship with Hermia in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, recalling how they

Have with our needles created both one flower,
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
As if our hands our sides, voices, and minds
Had been incorporate. So we grew together,
Like to a double cherry: seeming parted,
But yet an union in partition,
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem. (3.2.205-212)

The female bonds that prove most threatening are those that are rooted in the routine rather than the rare, the bonds Rosalind and Celia might have formed while eating and sleeping together, and those Hermia and Helena would have shared through sewing and singing day after day. In her discussion of female alliances, Jessica Tvorid argues that since the domestic sphere was an essentially female dominion, “a woman’s negotiation of power within the domestic power structure” resembled “a man’s negotiation of power in the public sphere.”67 Women could negotiate power by forming female bonds through the practice of ritual. In light of the

Reformation tendency to conflate a woman’s domestic and spiritual duties, even daily tasks could retain the sacred element of ritual, though they may not have been ritualized in the religious sense.

Thus representations of female-only ritual that rely on such mundane tasks as sewing and dressing are provocative, not only because such scenes are voyeuristic, but also because they suggest possibilities that contradict the feminine characteristics segregation and isolation were believed to foster. As Emilia helps Desdemona to undress for bed in *Othello*, for example, sexual innuendo permeates the dialogue. Othello suspects the sort of dubious female exchange that might have occurred in exclusively female spaces between his wife and Emilia, whom he calls “a subtle whore,/ A closet lock and key of villanous secrets,” a description that fuses female domestic space with female speech (4.2.22-3). Emilia not only represents the threat of what can occur between women behind closed doors, but is herself “a closet” to which Othello has no access because it is under “lock and key,” but in which he feels assured are hidden “villanous secrets.” Othello is perhaps not altogether wrong in his assessment of Emilia, as seen in the following conversation between the two women in Desdemona’s chamber:

Des. No. Unpin me here.

This Lodovico is a proper man.

Em. A very handsome man.

Des. He speaks well.

Em. I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to

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68 See Susan Frye’s insightful analysis of women’s needlework as an example of this paradox: “Women responded to the unchanging injunction to perform domestic needlework by evolving a subculture within which patterns and pictures articulated their lives. These patterns…formed visual expressions of narratives offering alternatives to the passivity, privacy, and silence that needlework was supposed to enforce.” She continues, “Indeed, needlework became a dynamic discourse through which its practitioners simultaneously obeyed and defied the injunction to passive silence,” *Maids and Mistresses*, 165.
Palestine for a touch of his nether lip. (5.1.32-7)

The ladies’ discussion of the good-looking Lodovico is harmless enough, but is later followed by Emilia’s provocative insinuation, “who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?” (5.1.74). Emilia calls adultery a “small vice” and states frankly that husbands should “know/ Their wives have sense like them” (5.1.67, 91). Her capacity for wantonness and its potential influence on Desdemona, who does “not think there is any such woman” who would cheat on her husband, represents the sort of dangerous private female speech men struggled to suppress and also justifies Iago’s claim that women “do let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands” (3.3.206-7). Scenes like this would serve not only to affirm but actually to realize men’s worst fears about female privacy in domestic spaces.

Similarly, Shakespeare enacts the possibilities suppressed by patriarchy in a short scene between Volumnia and Virgilia in *Coriolanus*, as the women “set them down on two low stools and sew.” In her speech, Volumnia does not exemplify feminine modesty, but instead exudes masculine boldness. She imagines seeing her son “pluck Aufidius down by th’ hair,” painting a picture of his “bloody brow” too graphic for Virgilia, who responds, “His bloody brow? O, Jupiter, no blood!” (1.3.27, 31, 35). Volumnia lacks the delicacy and decorum appropriate to female conversation. While Virgilia prays for her husband’s protection—“Heavens bless my lord from fell Aufidius!”—Volumnia anticipates a savage victory: “He’ll beat Aufidius’ head below his knee/And tread upon his neck.” (1.3.42-44). Though she is in this scene a contrast to Virgilia, Volumnia’s manner of speech is instructive; that is, she is teaching her daughter-in-law how to emulate her. Any male might wonder if such instruction could be occurring behind the closed doors of his own home.
The threats posed by female companionship without male supervision would have been troubling to a patriarchal society. This explains, in part, the frequently unfavorable literary representations of nuns, a group of women living together outside the constraints of male management. That this literary tradition began long before the time of the Reformation indicates that their Catholicism was not the only unsettling thing about such women. The period from the early twelfth to early fourteenth centuries saw an increase in the number of women becoming nuns as well as the decline of many male monasteries; by the fifteenth century, nuns clearly comprised “the majority of the cloistered religious.” So, the negative portrayal of nuns in early modern drama—in *The Jew of Malta*, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Measure for Measure*, to name a few—is not merely anti-Catholic in nature. These portrayals suggest a fear among women at the thought of not marrying and having children and a fear among men of imagining a feminine space free of male management. Throughout the Reformation, women who no longer had the option of entering a convent had to cloister themselves, either through service or marriage, within the domestic realm, a realm that became increasingly spiritualized and scrutinized.

Despite the uneasiness it might have caused men, communal female activity was the lesser of two evils: it would have been far worse for one’s wife to have been roaming about freely in mixed company than to have been penned up at home with other women. Since both “courtly bureaucracy and Protestant theology pitted the outside world against the home,” for a woman to venture outside of her household had serious moral and spiritual repercussions.

Before a woman “steps over the threshold,” according to *The Education of a Christian Woman*,

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she ought to “prepare her mind as if she were entering a combat.” To avoid the “shafts of the devil,” which would “perturb and upset her chastity and her good conscience,” a woman ought to avoid public outings whenever possible.\(^{71}\) Perkins emphasizes the spiritual implications of straying from home when he lists it among “the sins of wives”: “To be proud, to be unwilling to beare the authority of their husbands; to chide and braule with bitternes; to forsake their houses, etc.”\(^ {72}\) A woman who wandered from home not only abandoned her responsibility to her family, but also transgressed against God.

In spite of the Protestant renunciation of ritual in general, the definition of female spirituality in terms of domesticity actually enabled and affirmed female ritual practice. Though physically confined to domestic spaces, many women managed to find a way to make their captivity productive, “creating protected and even sacred spaces with their own symbols and aesthetic,” as Abate observes.\(^ {73}\) Ironically, “masculinist attempts to limit and define the feminine” in fact generated “a rich interaction that we might call a women’s culture, a culture that flourished less visibly but no less actively than men’s culture…”\(^ {74}\) At the heart of this culture was female spirituality, expressed through the careful completion of daily tasks and the performance of ritual. As Peters points out, “the definition of the role of women within the family may have encouraged a greater identification with ritual practices,” and this “association of women with religion and the maintenance of ritual”…was reinforced at all social levels.”\(^ {75}\)

As we shall see in the following chapters, representations of women engaged in ritual reinforce the idea of the woman as “ritual specialist,” alerting the spectator to the potential power


\(^{73}\) Corrine S. Abate, *Privacy, Domesticity, and Women*, 4; as I shall discuss in greater detail in a later chapter, this is especially true of the site of childbirth and everything that surrounded it.

\(^{74}\) Susan Frye, “Maternal Textualities,” 226.

\(^{75}\) Christine Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, 157; 11.
such a role must have carried with it. Such representations are worth exploring, especially as already embedded cultural attitudes toward women intersect with evolving views on religion and ritual. Early modern women likely felt themselves on the threshold of a newfound freedom in a religion in whose deity there was “nether male nor female,” yet oppressed still by stereotype-based patriarchal standards. Under these circumstances, stage representations of female ritualistic behavior, behavior that emphasized the fortitude of female bonds and often granted women an otherwise unattainable sense of power, might have (with good reason) heightened an already elevated level of anxiety among spectators—especially those who were male.
CHAPTER 2

“REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE A WOMAN”:
SIN, SACREDNESS, AND RITUALS OF BIRTH

One of the few ways in which early Protestant women could negotiate power was by forming bonds through the practice of rituals in exclusively female spaces. Stage representations of these rituals restore to women in some measure the agency they once had as managers of ritual. Such portrayals also allowed men to invade female events to which they normally had no access, both creating and responding to the fears and fantasies aroused in the male imagination with regard to the mystery of feminine spaces. The period of childbirth and a new mother’s “lying in” were the most prominent occasions for strictly female management since men were not only forbidden entrance to the birthroom, but were pushed to the periphery of all that surrounded the childbirth process. I argue that representations of childbirth rituals in works such as Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, and John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* reflect emerging Protestant perceptions of female piety, figuring female spirituality in terms of domestic activity and producing ambivalent views of feminine ritual practice.¹ Much like the place of worship, the birthroom is a site of confrontation for reformers, the ground upon which theology and practice must meet. What arises out of this encounter is a gendered and spiritualized battle of narratives—one based on sin and the other on sacredness—situated within the context of early modern childbirth.

While references to maternity rituals do occur in Renaissance drama, they are conspicuously scarce, and it is worth asking why these rituals might have been

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underrepresented. For most early modern dramatists, including those whose works are the subject of this chapter, the choice to hint at instead of stage the re-creation of such rituals in one sense exemplifies the marginalization of female-managed ritual in general. Gail Kern Paster notes that “childbirth is especially invisible in dramatic representation,” and if “the act of giving birth has been an offstage event,” so have the particular practices accompanying that act. Naturally, the dramaturgy of many plays does not allow for the staging of intricate ceremonies and rites; however, the omission might nevertheless betray the anxiety possibly provoked by these rituals.

Although their representations of specific childbirth rituals are incomplete, Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, and Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* rely on their audiences’ familiarity with such rituals to offer images of competing narratives with regard to what happens in female spaces. While Middleton’s play emphasizes the threat inherent in the “leakiness” of women’s bodies and women’s words through its portrayal of Mistress Allwit’s lying in, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Duchess of Malfi* accentuate the ambiguity of the cultural practice of churching, the ritualized ending to the lying-in period for most women. In contrast to Protestant teaching, these works offer a view of pregnancy and childbirth that emphasizes contamination. Looking at some contemporary notions of childbearing—its association with both sin and sacredness—will prove a helpful backdrop to an analysis of these works.

Childbirth was the most mysterious of events occurring in an exclusively female space. Indeed, that “women were the guardians of its mysteries” has proven problematic for historians

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since most of the surviving accounts of early modern childbirth were created by those who were barred from the actual experience—men.\textsuperscript{4} Childbirth in early modern England was a leveler; that is, it theoretically dissolved barriers of class and culture, fostering the formation of female bonds despite hierarchical difference. In the prologue to \textit{The Byrth of Mankinde} (1540), the English translation of Eucharius Röesslin’s work \textit{The Rose Garden for Pregnant Women and Midwives} (1513), Thomas Raynalde refers to “the manifolde, dayly, and imminent daungers and perils” of labor and delivery faced by “all manner of women, of what estate or degree soever they bee.”\textsuperscript{5} The etiquette of “pregnancy, midwifery, and female fellowship around the childbed” was understood to apply to every woman, as David Cressy notes, without regard to her class or station.\textsuperscript{6} The birthroom, or “lying-in chamber,” as it was often called, was a place of enclosure and therefore a place of exclusion—“a kind of womb…even more impenetrable than the womb it resembled,” in the words of Jennifer Hellwarth.\textsuperscript{7} In this sense, the birthroom itself, which “was supposed to be kept warm, dark, and snug,” was an ideal manifestation of the exclusivity, secrecy, and feminine intimacy the process entailed.\textsuperscript{8}

Throughout her delivery, lying-in, and churching, a woman would be accompanied by female attendants, commonly called “gossips.” When represented in literature, a wife’s “gossips” are often the greatest cause for her husband’s discomfort. According to Caroline Bicks, “these fictional groups of women appeared either in taverns or birthrooms, usually to tell


\textsuperscript{6} David Cressy, \textit{Birth, Marriage, and Death}, 15.


\textsuperscript{8} David Cressy, \textit{Birth, Marriage, and Death}, 53.
stories of marital dissatisfaction.” By the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, representing gossips’ gatherings was “a stock literary conceit.” The terminology which labeled female attendants “gossips” reinforced the idea of uncontrollable female speech outside the limits of male authority.9 The prologue to Samuel Rowlands’ Tis merry when Gossips meet (1656) offers a defense on behalf of the women it portrays:

Pray let us not be too much plaid upon:
We met indeed, ’tis true, and past and gone;
Merry we were, yet free from all offence,
And there were no men charg’d with our Expence.
Unto a penny wee our reckoning paid,
Then who can blame the Widdow, Wife and Maid,
For meeting, and kinde drinking each with other?10

Even this playful justification of gossips’ gatherings alludes to the female autonomy inherent in such meetings. Just as “no men” are “charg’d” for the women’s “expence,” neither are they “charg’d” with their keeping; that is, accountability for or regulation of the gossips’ behavior is entrusted to no man. Instead, the women pay their own “reckoning,” a sign of independence and self-rule.

Though men writing on the subject frequently dismissed what actually went on among gossips as nothing more than idle chatter, their paranoid and obsessive treatment of the topic suggests that they must have feared otherwise. The presence of female attendants during childbirth would actually have been quite practical—they were needed to care for the mother as

9 Caroline Bicks offers a useful history of the term “gossip,” Midwiving Subjects, 27; see also David Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, 55-56.
well as the newborn child. In his manual *The ladies companion, or, The English midwife*, William Sermon warns that the newly delivered woman ought to be kept from sleeping too much, “to prevent which,” he advises, “let them be entertained with some pleasing discourse…” This is one of the services a good gossip provided. As Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry note, however, these gatherings were “frequently satirized in literature—gossips swarmed around the mother from the instant of birth, expecting fancy foods, swigging celebratory spirits.” Like many other female rituals, the period of lying in was the object of ridicule and suspicion.

Certainly, calling on a newly delivered mother was an occasion for socializing and entertainment. In Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, when Valeria persists in urging the unwavering Virgilia to go “visit the good lady that lies in,” Volumnia finally insists that her daughter-in-law should not accompany them in her current state since she would “but disease our better mirth” (1.3.66, 73, 99). That Valeria’s invitation is an interruption of women’s work is clear—Virgilia is sewing when she is asked to “lay aside [her] stitchery” and “play the idle housewife” by accompanying the other women to the lying in (1.3.65-6)—as is the expectation that the outing would involve “much mirth” (1.3.104). Not only was the lying-in a time during which the wife accepted visitors and gifts, but it was also “a topsy-turvy time” during which the husband provisionally performed a number of the domestic tasks his wife was unable to carry out. Childbirth, and the activities surrounding it, threatened masculinity on several levels, and as Bicks observes, “the voyeurisitic nature” of satirical representations of these events gave the

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13 David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 35.
male audience “some measure of control over these emasculating women.”  

Men could either confirm or combat women’s narratives, in other words, through narratives of their own.

Women’s birthroom stories were threatening because they were generated in a space in which female speech was outside the limits of male authority; men feared what truths might unfold in the all-female space, yet discredited any such talk even as their paranoia gave it credence. In his study of early modern male anxiety, Mark Breitenberg observes that since the only satisfactory answer for the jealous man’s doubts is the “empirical, visible proof” to which he has no access, he “reads and over-reads those signs available to him.”

Even a women’s story that verifies the husband’s paternity is automatically suspect because it cannot be proven. Much early modern drama expresses the male anxiety about paternity through cuckold jokes. The doubting father is a popular version of this. At the opening of Much Ado About Nothing, for example, Leonato responds to Don Pedro’s comment that Hero must be his daughter with the nervous joke, “Her mother hath many times told me so” (1.1.86). Similarly, Prospero tells Miranda in The Tempest, “Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and/ She said thou was my daughter” (1.2.56-7). Women’s birthroom stories could and could not be trusted in part because of the atmosphere that produced them.

The real danger for men, then, was that among the rubbish of rumor and meaningless prattle male writers imagined these women exchanging could have been a scrap of truth, such as a gossip’s secret revealed in a moment of drunkenness or a mother’s confession spilled forth under the duress of extreme pain. Indeed, revealing of the child’s real father was commonly

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14 Caroline Bicks, Midwiving Subjects, 29.
believed to take place in the throes of labor. For this reason, midwives had to take an oath in which they swore to verify the paternity of the child’s father and to “prevent the replacing of the child (or no child) with another’s progeny,” as Bicks observes. The midwife, in fact, was credited with a great deal of authority. *The byrth of mankinde* shows the midwife’s power during the birth: “the Midwife herselfe shall…with her handes, first annoynted with the oyle of Almondes, or the Oyle of white Lillie, rule and direct everything as shall seeme best.” It was thought that the midwife had control over even such things as the length of the penis if the child was a boy, depending on how she cut the umbilical cord.

Likely because of the power with which she was endowed, writings about and representations of the early modern midwife contain a trace of the mystery and magic associated with contemporary constructions of the witch. Her association with the secret remedies and the “charms” of childbirth strengthens such a connection, and makes it feasible to render the reformers’ suspicion of birth rituals as a renunciation of female attempts to “counterfeit” God and his male ministers. The leap from the divine to the diabolical seems a short one—the mysteries of pregnancy and all-female ritual register a similar threat to reformers as do witches and even the Antichrist himself, the Catholic pope. Even as the midwife was charged to prevent the “replacing” of one child for another, she was herself seen by some as a replacement, one who enabled those women in her care to replace faith in God with counterfeit assurances.

After the birth, as during, the midwife retained her position of authority, continuing to “rule and direct everything as shall seeme best” when it came to matters of dispute or controversy over paternity. Just as this woman’s aptitude at severing the umbilical cord was

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19 Caroline Bicks, *Midwiving Subjects*, 42.
believed to reduce or increase the newborn boy’s penis, the midwife’s testimony could either
affirm or deny the grown man’s masculinity. The entire period of lying-in, a time during which
his house was overrun with female visitors and attendants, served to remind the husband “of his
inferior powers when it came to telling stories about his spouse and her offspring.” He could
never know for certain which of their stories was authentic, and he could not rely on his own
stories to combat theirs. He was, after all, an outsider.

Aaron the Moor certainly understands the authority of women’s birthroom stories when
he ruthlessly kills the birth attendants who helped to deliver his illegitimate son in Shakespeare’s
_Titus Andronicus_. Aaron questions the nurse after the delivery, “how many saw the child?” to
which she responds, “Cornelia, the midwife, and myself,/ And no one else but the delivered
empress” (4.2.139-41). He immediately kills the nurse, answering Demetrius’ reproach in the
following way: “Shall she live to betray this guilt of ours—/A long-tongued, babbling gossip?”
(4.2.148-49). Aaron then reveals his plan to also dispose of the midwife—“But send the midwife
presently to me./ The midwife and the nurse well made away,/ Then let the ladies tattle what they
please”—indicating his awareness that the credibility of a midwife’s story would overpower any
story he might invent. The other “ladies” may “tattle what they please” once the sources of
authority are “well made away.”

The belief that childbirth was something sacred rather than sinful might have produced
further male anxieties regarding spirituality. Since motherhood was an expected stage in the life
of any early modern wife, childbirth must have taken on a unique significance for the Protestant
woman who was taught that she was created for and charged with fulfilling that purpose alone.
The Protestant woman’s vocation was to be a good wife and mother. Thus, to figure this calling
as indicative of a uniquely intimate relationship between herself and God was one way in which

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20 Ibid., 25.
she could further spiritualize her domesticity, maintaining a sense of power with which she could negotiate in a male-centered world. In an insightful analysis, Jennifer Hellwarth argues that the prayers concerning childbirth in Thomas Bentley’s *The Monument of Matrones* (1582) render “the relationship between the pregnant woman and God” a decidedly “privileged” one. In one such prayer, the woman views herself as specifically chosen for the sacred task: “Therefore, oh heavenlie father, I yield thee most hartie thanks, that thou has vouchsafed to count me worthie, and made me the… receptacle of this thy most excellent worke.” In another prayer, she refers to God not only as her “Allmightie and mercifull father,” but also as her husband—the one who has “fructified [her] wombe” out of his “bountifull goodness” and “gratious blessing”—figuring the relationship in such a way that rejects the notion of sin in conception and aligns the pregnant woman with the Virgin Mary. Hellwarth argues that “through her female experience of birth, which is the manifestation of sinful, ‘weak,’ and female flesh,” the woman is ironically able to carve out for herself “a sacred space in order to express a singularly female and particular relationship to God.” No masculine counterpart existed for pregnancy; in this, the woman’s relationship to God was unique.

The notion that childbirth was linked to transgression offered a competing narrative to the one that rendered it sacred. The narrative of childbirth as sin served, in part, as a means of asserting masculine authority within the female-dominated context of birthing rituals. In her nuanced study of shame in early modern England, Paster asserts that the “understanding of the maternal body as polluted and polluting” contributed to the attachment of “shame and obscurity

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to the birth process”; I would like to shift this argument to the theological paradigm of sin and redemption, especially as manifested in Protestant beliefs about women. Even as some writers aligned the childbearing woman with the Virgin Mary, others reminded women that their pain in childbirth was the consequence of Eve’s sin, in which they all shared, and which they should bear with patience and humility. In The ladies companion, or, The English midwife (1671), William Sermon instructs the midwife to command the delivering woman “to be patient, calling upon the Almighty for help,” and to reiterate to her “what God hath said with his own mouth, for it would be almost a miracle to see a woman delivered without pain….”24 Martin Luther’s suggestion for comforting a childbearing woman offers a concise summary of the conventional Protestant view. One ought to offer encouragement:

not by repeating St. Margaret legends or other silly wives’ tales but by speaking thus,

‘Dear Grete, remember that you are a woman, and that this work of God in you is pleasing to him… Work with all your might to bring forth the child. Should it mean your death, then depart happily, for you will die in a noble deed and in subservience to God.”25

Luther dismisses any comforts other than faith in God as “silly wives’ tales,” a phrase that resonates with the term “gossips” as well as the suspicion of women’s birthroom stories. His idea of encouragement to the delivering mother is to remind her of her position: “remember that you are a woman.” Through such a statement, Luther both insinuates the justice of the physical pain of childbirth as punishment for Eve’s sin and affirms the reformation idea of motherhood as a woman’s vocation. This was, in other words, the only available means by which the “work of God” could manifest itself through the woman in a “pleasing” manner.

Judging from contemporary accounts, even an upright Protestant woman—a woman who believed her death in childbirth would be “in subservience to God”—could succumb to the temptation of “popish” assurances in her desperate state. Protestantism discouraged the many means of aid and comfort Catholicism had provided the woman in childbirth, as Cressy observes: calling on St. Margaret or the Virgin Mary for protection and reassurance, holding on to “religious relics, girdles, amulets, and fragments of the consecrated host,” participating in special chants, partaking of the Eucharist, and other practices that savored of superstition. Though reformers clearly denounced such activities, “the perilous intimacy of the birthroom” allowed for the continuation of illicit behaviors. The church did, however, do away with “special masses for childbearing women or prayers to the saints on their behalf during labor,” and required midwives to take an oath swearing not to “use any kind of sorcery or incantation” and to report those who did.\(^26\) For a woman to call upon superstitious rituals in her time of need was to contradict the reformers’ notion “that survival or death of any person—baby, child, or adult—was in the hands of God” alone.\(^27\) The possibility that women might easily slip into questioning the ultimate patriarchal authority simply by falling back on female (and Catholic) traditions in dire circumstances was especially threatening since the birthroom was free of male regulation.

The rhetoric of sin and purification that was so crucial to the patriarchal view of childbirth culminated in the churching ceremony, undergone by the new mother at the end of her lying-in period as her means of reintegration back into her community. As a Christian remnant of the Hebraic purification rite described in the twelfth chapter of Leviticus, churching was a controversial practice in Reformation England. As Jeanne Roberts points out, “the association of birth and pollution was strong in the ancient Hebraic tradition,” and it was precisely this

\(^{26}\) David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 23.

\(^{27}\) Suzanne Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475-1640* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982), 118.
association that bothered Protestants when it came to a woman’s reentry into society after childbirth.²⁸ The notion that childbirth was contaminating was part of a set of laws from which Christ was believed to have set Christians free, and the idea that a ceremony could have the effect of cleansing or purification clashed with the Protestant view that God alone holds the power to accomplish such things. The 1549 edition of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer included a service for “The Purification of Women,” but immediate protests resulted in a change in the title in 1552 to “The Thanksgiving of Women after Child-Birth Commonly Called the Churching of Women.” For those who denied the power of (or the need for) a cleansing ritual, the practice became instead a celebration of the woman’s safe delivery; for those who insisted upon the contamination involved in childbirth, however, the ritual remained a purification rite that was “almost penitential.”²⁹

The public dialogue of the male-governed churching service presented a clear antithesis to the private discussions of the female-managed birthroom. In this way, churching offered “a ritual closure” to the exceptional circumstances of the childbirth process, restoring “normal domestic order.”³⁰ Scholars on the subject vary in their interpretations of the ritual’s causes and effects. Paster concludes that the continued practice of churching in Reformation England has to do with the “rhetoric of unclean flowings from breast and womb immediately after childbirth.”³¹ Keith Thomas argues for the practice’s implications of purification based on Puritan opposition to its rituals.³² Cressy suggests, however, the possibility that churching was not so much a rite through which a woman was forced to go as a celebration of sorts in her honor.³³ And if, as

²⁹ David Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, 208.
³⁰ Ibid., 204.
³¹ Gail Kern Paster, The Body Embarrassed, 194.
³³ David Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, 206.
Cressy continues, “the primary work of childbearing…was not the production of a child but the deliverance of a woman,” churching would have been an empowering experience for the new mother.34 Churching can be read as a form of redemption and purification, if not from the supposed defilement of childbirth, from the topsy-turvy milieu in which the entire process was enveloped.

Some associated childbirth with the sin of Eve in the same way that they associated original sin with the sin of Adam, a connection John Donne makes explicit by including the following explanation of original sin in his sermon “preached at Essex House, at the Churching of the Lady Doncaster” (1618): “The body, being without sinne, and the soule, being without sinne, yet in the first minute, that this body and soule meet, and are united, we become in that instant, guilty of Adam’s sinne, committed six thousand years before” 35 Donne’s sermon is permeated with images of pollution: “Our mothers,” he claims, “conceived us in sin; and being wrapped up in uncleanness there, can any Man bring a cleane thing out of filthinesse? There is not one…”36 As Cressy notes, “childbirth involved sorrow, shame, and chastisement” since it linked women to the curse of Eve, “yet under Christ the woman’s labor was part of a covenant of sanctification, mercy, and eternal comfort.”37 The contextualization of childbirth as a spiritual experience involving sin and sanctification left many religious writers unable to separate childbirth from the notion of contamination or “defilement.”38

34 Ibid., 15.
37 David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 16-17.
38 Ibid., 19.
The entire process of giving birth was viewed as a metaphor for fallen humanity, a view that resonates with the image of Mary Magdalene as a Protestant female model. What the example of Mary Magdalene demonstrates, the process of childbirth enacts: because of depravity and the nature of sin, humanity bears a burden from which it must be delivered through affliction and faith in God alone. Implicit in this metaphor is the notion that the isolation and danger of childbirth represent death, while the mother’s recovery and reentry into community represent resurrection. See, for example, this excerpt from John Donne’s sermon for the churching of Frances Egerton:

God having rais’d his honorable servant, and hand-maid here present, to a sense of the Curse, that lyes upon women, for the transgression of the first woman, which is painfull, and dangerous Child-birth; and given her also, a sense of the last glorious resurrection, in having rais’d her, from that Bed of weaknesse, to the ability of coming into his presence, here in his house.39

The woman’s experience of giving birth is linked to Eve’s “Curse” and to “weaknesse,” while “the ability of coming into his presence”—to church, among the society from which she has been temporarily barred (or rather buried, metaphorically speaking)—is an act of redemption. By figuring birth as a symbol of the death and resurrection of Christ, Donne and other writers attributed to women privileges to which no man had access. Certainly the alignment of women with Christ on this level would have unleashed male anxieties already aroused by men’s exclusion from the events of childbirth. Men could neither participate in the physical aspects of birth nor share in the spiritual association with Christ that came of it.

The most important element of the churching service—presumably the sole reason for it, from the Protestant viewpoint—seems to be the delivered woman’s offering of thanks. Such a service might well have provided the only public arena in which this could occur, and even then it must have been authorized by the male priest, of course. The priest begins the service by addressing the woman: “Forasmuche as it hath pleased almyghtye God of hys goodness to geve you safe delyveraunce, and hath preserved you in the great danger of childbirth: ye shal therefore geve heartye thankes unto God and praye.”\(^{40}\) Clearly, the service that follows is set up as the woman’s prayer of thanksgiving to God for his protection and deliverance. Indeed, the words of the service, comprised mostly of Psalm 121, focus quite clearly on deliverance rather than purification:

I have lifte up myne eyes unto the hylles, from whence com-
meth my help.

My helpe cometh even from the Lord: which hath made
heaven and earth.

He wyll not suffer thy foote to be moved: and he that kepeth
the, wil not slepe.

Beholde, he that kepeth Israell: shall neyther slomber nor
slepe.

The Lorde hym selfe is thy keeper: the Lorde is thy defence
upon thy ryght hande.

So that the sonne shall not burne the by daye, neither the
moone by night.

\(^{40}\) “The Thankesgevinge of Women After Childe Byrthe, Communelye Called The Churchynge of Women,” \textit{The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth} 1559 (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909), 140.
The Lorde shal preserve the from al evil: yea, it is even he that
shal kepe thy soule.

The Lorde shal preserve thy goinge out, and thy commynge in:
from thys tyme forth for evermore.41

Though nothing in the service suggests a need for purification from the contamination involved
in the childbirth process, the woman’s experience is associated with the “evil” from which “the
Lord shal preserve” her. This passage, in fact, seems less like an offering of thanks for past
deliverance and more like a petition for future protection, or more accurately, a blessing
bestowed that speaks into existence the preservation of the Lord upon the woman.

The commentary in the Geneva Bible introduces this particular psalm as one that
“teacheth that the faithful ought onely to loke for helpe at God… Who onely doeth mainteine,
preserve and prosper his Church.”42 Such a comment is a typical representation of the anti-
Catholic tenor of the Geneva Bible—another reminder that the rituals of popery usurp the power
that belongs to God alone. This particular note is of interest because of the implications it has
for the selection of Psalm 121 for the churching service. What appeared previously to be an
expression of gratitude for past deliverance, or of faith in future deliverance, becomes now more
like an oath of loyalty extracted from the new mother clarifying her status as a good Protestant
woman. The passage could then be read even as a sort of confession, a public renunciation of
any superstitious aids she might have called on in her time of travail, an act of penitence and
renewed religious commitment. In this way, the words of the service have more to do with
purification than they might seem to at first glance.

41 “The Thankesgevinge of Women After Childe Byrthe,” 140.
42 William Whittingham, The Bible and Holy Scriptures conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament. Translated
according to the Ebrue and Greke, and conferred with the best translations in diuers languages...(1561), Early
English Books Online (Ann Arbor: UMI 1999- ) University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX. 10 December
2005.
A subtle change in the first verse of this passage emphasizes its oath-like nature—the biblical “I Wil lift mine eyes unto the mountains, from whence mine helpe shal come” becomes in the churching service “I have lyfte up myne eyes unto the hylles, from whence commeth my help.” The suggestion of the past tense in the service’s “I have lyfte up,” a public expression of the woman’s private thoughts and behavior, heightens the confessional tone of the passage. This reading of the churching service is consistent with the ending prayer, in which the priest asks God to help the woman “faithfully live, and walke in her vocation, accordyng to thy wil, in this lyfe present, and also may be partaker of everlasting glory in the lyfe to come…” The prayer serves as a charge to the woman, a reminder of her “vocation” as a wife and mother, interestingly echoing the prayer at the end of the Prayer Book’s service for confirmation, in which the priest asks God to defend the child “with thy heavenly grace that he may continue thine for ever, and daiely encrease in thy holy spirite more and more, untill he come unto they everlasting kingdom.” The woman had undergone, it would seem, a new baptism.

Childbirth, then, created a site of spiritual negotiation. The all-female interaction, conversation, and supervision of the birthroom generated intense curiosity and anxiety in men, who were denied direct access to it, and the implications of the churching ceremony seemed to confirm the contamination associated with the process. One character who responds with typical bewilderment and uneasiness to the events of childbirth is Master Allwit of Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1630). Allwit depicts his wife’s “lying in” as a scene of extravagance and mystery:

A lady lies not in like her; there’s her embossings,

Embroiderings, spanglings, and I know not what,

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43 “The Thankesgevinge of Women After Childe Byrthe,” 141.
44 “Confirmacion, Wherein is Contained a Catechisme for Children,” *The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth 1559* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909), 120.
As if she lay with all the gaudy shops
In Gresham’s Burse about her; then her restoratives,
Able to set up a young ‘pothecary,
And richly stock the foreman of a drug shop;
Her sugar by whole loaves, her wines by rundlets.  

Allwit’s references to so many mercantile details suggest his anxiety about the excess of material
and monetary goods required for such an occasion. He mentions also an overabundance of
medicines—enough to “richly stock the foreman of a drug shop”—and food in ridiculous
quantities. Allwit describes a woman who gorges and guzzles her way through childbirth
recovery, consuming with a ravenous appetite. He also exoticizes his wife’s lying in, revealing
simultaneously a sense of confusion and enchantment regarding this feminine space filled with “I
know not what.”

Master Allwit wants no part of the chaos which has infiltrated his household and says
with relief: “I am tied to nothing in this business…Here’s running to and fro: nurse upon
nurse,/Three charwomen, besides maids and neighbors’ children./Fie, what a trouble have I rid
my hands on!” (2.2.4-5, 7-8). Because he is not the child’s father—he is the stereotypical
wittol, or willing cuckold—he has escaped the overwhelming financial burden typically associated with
childbirth and lying in, the brunt of which has fallen to the child’s real father, Sir Walter
Whorehound. The joke here is that women in childbirth are so demanding and extravagant that a
husband would suffer less by sacrificing his masculinity to her infidelity than by squandering his
well-earned wages on her every whim, as this excerpt from The Bachelor’s Banquet (1603)
illustrates:

Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Ramussen (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002),
1.2.30-38. All other references to this work are from this edition will be cited parenthetically.
But when the time draws near of her lying down, then must he trudge to get gossips, such as she will appoint, or else all the fat is in the fire. Consider then what cost and trouble it will be to him to have all things fine against the christening day, what store of sugar, biscuits, comfits and caraways, marmalade and marchpane, with all kind of such sweet suckets and superfluous banqueting stuff, with a hundred other odd and needless trifles which at that time must fill the pockets of dainty dames…putting the poor man to such expense that in a whole year he can scarcely recover that one month’s charges.  

Allwit can gladly say: “I pay for none at all, yet fools think’s mine;/I have the name, and in his gold I shine.” His wife’s voracious sexual appetite—echoed by the insatiable gossips’ appetites for “sweetmeats” and other fine foods—is too costly to bear alone.

Middleton’s play invites the audience, male and female alike, into the very bedchamber in which the private and mysterious rituals of childbirth take place. As Act 3, scene 2 of the play begins, the audience sees “A bed thrust out upon the stage, Allwit’s wife in it.” The image of Mistress Allwit is one of excess. She is, according to David Bevington, “an embodiment of domestic abundance,” and she is surrounded by other female figures of excess, women whose seemingly boundless verbal facility and capacity for consumption are the source of much dread and disdain.  

Mistress Allwit’s “body is ever present, and it is often a messy body with its fluids, its appetites, its leaking,” a fitting physical manifestation of the destructive potential of female appetites and the “leakiness” of women’s words. Since the stories that leaked forth out of gossips’ lips could confirm or deny the legitimacy of one’s child, audience access to this sort

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48 David Bevington, *Introduction*, 1457; see also Gail Kern Paster’s connection between “excessive verbal fluency” and the “liquid expressiveness” of female bodies, or “leaky vessels” in *The Body Embarrassed*, 25.
of scene is provocative indeed. We see, for example, how secrets are told among tipsy women when the Fourth Gossip is able to elicit some scandalous information from the Third, saying “Wine can do that I see, that friendship cannot” (3.2.110). For Allwit not to question the paternity of his wife’s offspring—indeed, to know that the child is not his and to be even pleased with his status as a cuckold—makes for good comedy while also drawing attention to the dangers inherent in the female companionship of the birthroom. Though the stated cause for suspicion has been eliminated, in other words, there remains much room for suspicion still. That Mistress Allwit is in fact an adulteress validates men’s mistrust in one sense, but reveals the inadequacy of female sexual fidelity as a measure of male authority on the other.

The entrance of Tim into the scene provides a striking realization of male anxiety with regard to female ritual space, validating common fears about such women’s gatherings. All of the men in the audience are, of course, in Tim’s position—sent to “thrust ’mongst married wives,” where they are quite out of place (3.2.142). Tim’s mother, Maudlin, describes him as “bashful” and explains that “in the university they’re kept still to men and ne’er trained up to women’s company” (3.2.133-35). The same could surely have been said about many male members of the audience, especially when it came to the details of labor and delivery. For a man to even talk about childbirth would have been unusual since that would have been thought “an indelicate intrusion into the female domain”; for a man to actually insert himself into the physical space of childbirth must have seemed strange.49 This is, in part, why the scene is funny. Maudlin is aware of the intimidating nature of the situation, and urges it all the more for that reason. “Prithee call him up among the women,” she tells the nurse, “’Twill embolden him well, for he wants nothing but audacity” (3.2.120-22). She wishes to toughen him up, and to be “among the women” presumably requires the sort of courage that she feels he is lacking.

49 David Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, 20.
In keeping with the comparison of the birthroom to the womb, Tim’s presence in this environment has several implications. Once in the company of his mother and the other women, he is so infantilized, to use Bevington’s term, that he has little more agency than Mistress Allwit’s newborn baby. That he insists on bringing his tutor with him only makes him look more childish. Tim immediately gets into an argument with his mother, who threatens to whip him. He replies:

Oh, monstrous absurdity! Ne’er was the like in Cambridge since my time. Life, whip a bachelor? You’d be laughed at soundly. Let not my tutor hear you. ’Twould be a jest through the whole university. No more words, mother. (3.2.159-62)

Tim’s conclusion is merely to shut his mother up—“no more words”—as he tries to undermine the maternal authority Maudlin exercises over him.

Tim’s insertion into this female “womb” also leaves him in the vulnerable position of being sexually objectified. His mother claims he lacks “audacity” and his actions prove her right—Tim is no match for the Gossips, who presently maul him with their unwanted kisses in a scene that recalls the violent group kissing scene of Troilus and Cressida. In Shakespeare’s play, when Cressida arrives at the Greek camp, Agamemnon greets her with a kiss, after which Ulysses remarks, “Yet is the kindness but particular; ’Twere better she were kissed in general” (3.2.21-22). What follows is a sort of rape scene during which Cressida is tossed about among the men, being kissed in turn by Nestor, Ulysses, Achilles, Menelaus, and Patroclus. The kissing scene in Chaste Maid is infused with more comedy than this one, perhaps precisely because of the gender reversal—those in power are women and the object of their exploitation is a man. Tim responds much more vehemently than does Cressida, who remains passive. After Lady Kix kisses him, for example, he cries: “Oh, this is horrible! She wets as she kisses. Your
handkercher, sweet tutor, to wipe them off, as fast as they come on!” (3.2.181-83). Of the second kisser he says: “This is intolerable. This woman has a villainous sweet breath, did she not stink of comfits. Help me, sweet tutor, or I shall rub my lips off.” Implicit in Tim’s reactions is not only a sense of outrage at being imposed upon, but a sense of disgust at being exposed to the contamination of these female bodies. He must “wipe” off the kisses “as fast as they come on,” and does so with such vigor that he fears he “shall rub [his] lips off.” Tim is horrified to find himself surrounded by “leaky” women. The play consistently represents women as uncontainable—not only the newly delivered Mistress Allwit, but also her gossips, who “wet” as they kiss and discharge “villainous” odors; Maudlin, who talks incessantly; and Maudlin’s daughter, Moll, whose self-awareness and sexual desires thwart her father’s repeated attempts to lock her up. The fact that Mistress Allwit’s baby is a girl suggests the inevitability of this cycle’s continuation.

Like *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, *The Winter’s Tale* associates childbirth with contamination and, consequently, with sin. In this play, however, it is the connection of childbirth to sacredness—specifically the alignment of the woman with Christ—that resonates through images of resurrection and redemption. When Leontes summons Hermione forth for trial during the middle of her lying-in period, she is baffled by his cruelty in denying her, his queen, the “childbed privilege,” a right that belongs to “women of all fashion” (3.2.101-2). Leontes’ unreasonable demand of Hermione is likely motivated by the belief that women often disclosed the identity of their child’s real father during labor or the lying-in, a notion that would have exacerbated his already extravagant jealousy. As Jeffrey Johnson notes, “Hermione’s first public appearance” after giving birth “should have been not her trial, but her churching.”

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50 Jeffrey Johnson, “‘which ’longs to women of all fashion’: Churching and Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale,*” *Early Theatre* 7.2 (2004): 75-85.
Though Johnson claims that “the personal, legalistic action that Leontes puts forward as a matter of state usurps the obligations of religious discipline and the authority of the church,” it seems Leontes’ behavior is less a usurpation of church authority and more “a clearly unwarranted intrusion of patriarchal power…into an arena formerly assigned to women’s control,” as Paster notes. Not only is Leontes’ behavior a blatant violation of Hermione’s physical health—she is brought out “I’th’ open air, before/ [she] has got strength of limit”—but also of the spiritual benefits of ritual performed and authorized by women. Leontes’ demand also suggests a parallel between the processes of churcing and trial, emphasizing the association of childbirth with sin and redemption.

Leontes could also be reacting to his wife’s pregnancy not only as evidence of infidelity, but as a signifier of her sexuality in general. Jeanne Roberts observes that “when faced with the fact of birth, the male’s greatest difficulty seems to be in harmonizing Virgin and ‘Whore,’” resulting in literary representations in which births are “clouded, ominous, divisive, or catastrophic.” Stephen Greenblatt attributes Leontes’ disregard of his wife’s weakened physical condition to his belief “that her adulterous body is defiled beyond redemption,” a reading that certainly fits well with Reformation theology; however, the proof of adultery upon which Leontes builds his case is Hermione’s pregnancy itself, which is, of course, no proof at all. Early modern women “drifted into and out of pregnancy with alarming regularity,” as Theodora Jankowski points out, which served to validate male notions of female instability since “the female body—in direct contrast to the male body—is a body in a state of constant flux.”

The unpredictability and changeability of women’s bodies made them strikingly different from

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51 Jeffrey Johnson, “‘which ’longs to women of all fashion,’” 76; Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 273.
men’s bodies and called perpetual attention to men’s lack of control over women’s sexuality. Leontes interprets Hermione’s pregnancy as an indication of her misconduct—“let her sport herself/ With what she’s big with, [to Hermione] for ’tis Polixenes/ Has made thee swell thus”—misreading the only physical sign available to him as the “empirical, visible proof” to which Breitenberg refers.55 “You mistook, my lady—/ Polixenes for Leontes,” he says, revealing also a profound anxiety about his own vulnerability as one who can be easily replaced, echoing the familiar Protestant fear of counterfeiting (2.1.63-4, 83-4).

Only when Hermione collapses at the news of her son’s death does Leontes transfer his suspicion to sorrow. His clarity is conspicuously sudden as he repents of his “jealousies”: “I’ll reconcile me to Polixenes,/New woo my queen, recall the good Camillo,” he vows (3.2.153-4). Upon hearing that Hermione has died, Leontes claims that the cause of her death shall be his “shame perpetual” (3.2.236). As with Phillip Stubbes’ portrayal of his wife’s Christian virtue upon her death, discussed in the previous chapter, a woman who died in childbirth became a martyr of sorts while the safely delivered mother was immediately rendered suspect—“teetering on the edge of institutional infidelity,” Bicks observes, “because of her time spent confined at home and away from an organized Christian community.”56 Hermione is just such a woman. While she is living, she has no chance of restoration. Her trial is perfunctory, something of which Hermione herself is well aware:

> Since what I am to say must be but that
> Which contradicts my accusation, and
> The testimony on my part no other
> But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me

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55 Mark Breitenberg, Anxious Masculinity, 178.
56 Caroline Bicks, Midwiving Subjects, 166.
To say ‘Not guilty.’ Mine integrity

Being counted as falsehood shall, as I express it

Be so received. (3.2.20-6)

Even before she testifies, Hermione is condemned by virtue of the fact that she is standing trial in the first place. The same could be said of the newly delivered mother: even as she comes to the church, she is scrutinized as a “green woman,” one that “should stay at home, refrain from sexual intercourse, and not participate in the sacraments of the church” until she has properly reentered society after her isolation from all except her female attendants.57

When Leontes initially accuses Hermione, in fact, he does so by intruding upon an all-female gathering much like a meeting of gossips, a gathering in which tales are told. Bicks accounts for the presence of young Mamillius among the ladies in Act 2, scene 1 by calling him the play’s “central gossiping figure,” especially since he is the spinner of the “eponymous winter’s tale”; however, the boy’s presence in this female gathering also resembles Tim’s in A Chaste Maid.58 Mamillius’ rejection of the First Lady’s offer to be his “play-fellow” recalls the scene from Middleton’s play: “You’ll kiss me hard,” he complains, “and speak to me as if/ I were a baby still” (2.1.6-7). Leontes removes Mamillius from this gathering of women, expressing a fear of contamination by the boy’s mother as he does so: “I am glad you did not nurse him./Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you/ Have too much blood in him” (2.1.59-61). Leontes concludes that his son is safer out of his mother’s potentially infectious reach: “he shall not come about her” (2.1.61). It is no coincidence that Leontes chooses to confront Hermione at just this moment, in the midst of an all-female gathering that bears a disturbing resemblance to the birthroom.

57 David Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, 203.
58 Caroline Bicks, Midwiving Subjects, 36.
Like Hermione, the Duchess in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* embodies female sexuality in a way that threatens those men under whose control she is supposed to be. Mary Beth Rose claims that the “erotic identity” of the work’s title character “is omnipresent in the play and central to it.” The closeness in proximity of the Duchess’ giving birth and her imprisonment by Ferdinand allows for a connection between the penance through which Ferdinand forces the Duchess to go and the purification ritual of churching, again emphasizing the link between childbirth and sin. Although the events are actually separated by years, the dramaturgy of the play pushes them together, calling attention to the correlation between the two. This correlation implies that though the Duchess’ chief transgression appears to be her clandestine marriage to Antonio, what is most unsettling about the Duchess’ behavior is her bearing of this man’s children. Pregnancy and childbirth are in this play, as in many early modern works, tainted by male suspicion. Bosola’s discovery of the Duchess’ condition communicates as much: “so, so, there’s no question but her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricocks are apparent signs of breeding” (2.2.1-2). The certain and “apparent signs” of pregnancy are irritability and appetite, showing the “vulturous” nature of female sexuality. To her brothers, especially Ferdinand, the Duchess’ pregnancies are both signs of her sexual capacity and sources of pollution.

As in *The Winter's Tale*, the audience is enticed to imagine the birthroom scene, hearing only descriptions rather than being allowed to watch. Both plays omit most of the stages that normally accompanied childbirth: “blessing of the marriage bed, rites and charms to insure

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60 Frank Whigham argues that once he imprisons the duchess, “Ferdinand appropriates and adapts from the two ritual-purification practices of ‘churching’ and the charivari,” “Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*,” *Incest and the Literary Imagination*, Ed. Elizabeth Barnes (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 69.
fertility, birth, washing, parental acknowledgment, naming, gift giving, welcoming into family and community, and later the ‘purification’ or ‘thanksgiving’ of the mother.” These rituals are not entirely absent from *The Duchess of Malfi*—Delio asks when the Duchess goes into labor if Antonio has “prepared/ Those ladies to attend her” and arranged for the midwife to come, for example, and upon his child’s birth, Antonio has “set a figure for ’s nativity” (2.1.153-4; 2.2.75). Such rituals were so well known to the audience that a mere mention would likely have been enough to call to mind their full performance.

Ferdinand is obsessive in his quest for the proper modes of punishment and purification for his sister, a manifestation of his fear that her contamination might, as Antonio states in the beginning of the play, like “some cursed example of poison near the head,/ Death and diseases through the whole land spread” (1.1.14). Ferdinand takes this idea to the extreme; he views his sister’s body as corrupt and in need of “desperate physic,” her blood as “infected” and in need of purging (2.5.23, 26). He visualizes her in the sexual act, “haply with some strong-thighed bargeman”; he also refers frequently to her “bastards,” indicating his disgust not just with the Duchess’ sexuality but with her reproductivity (2.5.41, 43, 29). The Duchess’ “shameful act of sin” necessitates penance and purification, which Ferdinand imagines will require an agent no less powerful than fire: he would “have their bodies/ Burnt in a coal-pit with the vantage stooped...Or else to boil their bastard to a cullis” (2.5.67-8, 73). Ferdinand’s sense of personal responsibility in the righteous correction of his sister leads to what Ellen Caldwell calls the play’s “invasive procedures,” which are manifestations of “the age’s desire not only to lend autonomy to the individual, but also to assail that privacy through legal and religious procedures

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of interrogation.”62 If the play, as Caldwell claims, “exposes the perverse pleasures of those who seek to violate the secrets of the bedchamber, the closet, the womb, the heart,” it also calls attention to the ineffectiveness of such violation—the Duchess maintains authority, after all, through her “secrets.”63

The Duchess is the object of masculine anxiety for reasons other than her sensual and procreative capacity. As a female ruler, and also a widow—free from the immediate control of a husband—the Duchess gives the men around her cause to be anxious. Rose compares the Duchess to the cross-dressed heroine of comedies, noting that both “widowhood” and “androgynous disguise” offer unique temporary and limited freedoms,” an interesting description in terms of the Duchess’ gender ambiguity throughout the play.64 Since widows represent a threat to patriarchal structures precisely because of their ambiguity—she is neither maid nor wife and is thus under the control of neither father nor husband—there emerged in early modern culture a discourse of widowhood based on masculine anxiety.65 This discourse focused not on widows’ economic and political freedoms, but portrayed them as “imperious in their chambers crowded with suitors, and lusty and demanding in their sexuality.”66 In his contribution to Thomas Overbury’s The Overburian Characters (1614), Webster distinguishes a vertuous widdow, one who “thinkes shee hath traveld all the world in one man” from an ordinarie widdow, one for whom “the end of her husband beginnes in teares; and the end of her teares

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63 Ellen Caldwell, “Invasive Procedures,” 178; 150.
64 Mary Beth Rose, “The Heroics of Marriage in Renaissance Tragedy,” 130.
beginnes in a husband.”67 He also describes the *vertuous widdow* as “a Relique, that without any superstition in the world, though she will not be kist, yet may be reverenc’t,” an image to which the Duchess herself alludes when she asks Ferdinand why she should “of all the other princes of the world, Be cased up like a holy relic” and not allowed to marry.68 Although “widowhood…forced women, temporarily or permanently, into a more autonomous financial and social position,” many women did not choose to remain in this position of increased autonomy.69 Early modern women perceived widowhood “as a life stage,” although often a “transitory” one since “many widows remarried.”70 Neither the Duchess’ desire to remarry nor her brothers’ anticipation of that desire, then, is uncommon.

Even after they remarried, widows retained a potentially subversive degree of freedom. Those who argued against her remarriage figured the widow in terms of her sexual insatiability as rhetorical resistance to the power she was in a position to preserve (a male counter-narrative to the female narrative, once again). Because “the feared relationship between a rich widow and her new husband involves the emasculating exchange of gendered roles,” a threat to masculinity in general, men created a representation of the widow that destabilized her potential authority.71 Jennifer Panek argues that the early modern notion of the voracious sexual appetites of widows “assuaged the anxiety aroused by the prospect of a man marrying a woman who was maritally experienced, wealthier, and often older than he was” by “focusing on the suitor’s sexual

69 Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 261.
71 Jennifer Panek, “‘My naked weapon’: Male Anxiety and the Violent Courtship of the Jacobean Stage Widow,” *Comparative Drama* 34.3 (Fall 2000): 327.
prowess…and by reducing the powerful widow to a mere woman, laughably at the mercy of her feminine appetite.” Panek attributes this portrait of “the sexually rapacious widow” to the male reaction against female autonomy: “she serves as a kind of ideological substitute for the official male control from which she had slipped free.”72 Ferdinand warns his sister that “they are most luxurious/Will wed twice” as he tries to ensure his control over her actions (1.3.7). Even as he urges her to “be not cunning,” he seems to realize that her ability to be cunning is not under the jurisdiction of his authority, so he further warns that her “darkest actions” and “privatest thoughts/Will come to light” (1.3.17, 23-4). Ferdinand’s framing of his sister as a “lusty widow” is a flawed attempt at the compensation mechanism to which Panek refers; he seems aware of the inadequacy of this method even as he tries to employ it (1.3.47).

The only space in which the audience views a moment of exclusively female intimacy is not the Duchess’ bedchamber or birthroom, but her prison. Cariola tells the Duchess that she looks like a mere representation of herself, “like to your picture in the gallery,/A deal of life in show, but none in practice;/Or rather like some revered monument/ Whose ruins are even pitied” (4.2.32-3). The imagery recalls Hermione’s “statue” at the end of A Winter’s Tale. Both women die—the Duchess physically and Hermione emotionally—as martyrs, and each ends up as a sort of “holy relic,” to use the Duchess’ phrase. The Protestant metaphor for childbirth placed the woman in a similar position: she was deemed a sinner, and must suffer the consequences of sin before she could obtain salvation. The greater the faith with which she approached her travail, the greater her spiritual reward.

The Duchess’ martyrdom is a reminder, then, of her maternity. She receives news of her impending death with “so much obedience in [her] blood” that she makes no effort to resist (4.2.151). In response to Cariola’s cry of despair, the Duchess stoically replies “Peace, it

72 Ibid., 323-4
affrights me not” (4.2.154). She later assures Bosola that she is terrified by the prospect of her death “not a whit” (4.2.197). John Knott notes that “Foxe’s Reformation martyrs…may turn away from wives and children at the end but make arrangements for their care.” The Duchess reacts similarly, as her final words to Cariola are just such instructions for the care of her children: “I pray thee, look thou giv’st my little boy/ Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl/ Say her prayers ere she sleep” (4.2.185-7). In another Christ-like gesture of nobility, the Duchess offers forgiveness to her executioners (4.2.189). In her response to her brothers’ cruelty, the Duchess actualizes the martyr’s belief that “the way to defeat power wielded by the authority” was to prove that “the soul could remain untouched whatever punishment was inflicted on the body.” For martyrs, “to feel a holy joy in the face of death was a sign of divine support,” and the Duchess reflects that “holy joy” as she begs, “Come, violent death” (4.2.215).

The Duchess’ triumphant approach to death reflects not only to the resolve of a martyr, but also of a “witch,” according to Caldwell. The two do have points of intersection—chiefly, the shared methodology that led to the inevitable death of the person accused of being either. That is, the only innocent witch (or heretic) is a dead one. To die nobly—as the Protestant woman whose death in childbirth is “in subservience to God”—is the only proof of innocence available. In contrast to the Duchess, Cariola faces the prospect of death in panic, begging for mercy and offering one reason after another why she should be spared. Interestingly, it is Cariola’s final excuse—“I am quick with child” (4.2.234)—that prompts Bosola to finally order her death, a tactic used also by Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc in I Henry VI—“I am with child, ye bloody homicides./Murder not then the fruit within my womb” (5.6.63-4). Cariola, like Joan,

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chooses the wrong ploy in her desperation, punctuating the statement that has run throughout the play: pregnancy is a form of pollution.

Ferdinand’s regret at the news of his sister’s death is much like Leontes’ grief: “Why didst thou not pity her?... I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits,/ Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done ’t” (4.2.254, 259-60). While the Duchess is not allowed a full resurrection as Hermione is—the restoration that fulfills the same purpose as the churching service—I would argue that she is allowed a brief moment of rebirth, even before her final appearance in the play as the disembodied voice called “Echo.” After his confrontation with Ferdinand, Bosola, who thought the Duchess dead, exclaims, “She stirs; here’s life…She’s warm, she breathes…” (4.2.321, 323). Her brief resurrection allows the Duchess the opportunity to cry “Mercy!” Although this could be an exclamation of joy at hearing that Antonio still lives, it also recalls Bosola’s statement just a few lines earlier: “And heaven in it seems to ope, that late was shut,/ To take me up to mercy.” This connection makes the Duchess’ outburst seem more like a prayer, perhaps a faint echo of the confessional nature of the churching service (4.2.327-8).

In an attempt to purge the processes of childbirth and churching of Catholic remnants and as a rebuttal to the association of women with sacredness through pregnancy and birth, the Protestant emphasis on sin and redemption reinforced a narrative that linked childbirth to contamination. Middleton’s play shows how men answered the stories generated in female spaces with stories of their own: Mistress Allwit, a new mother who holds a particular power through her experience of childbirth, becomes an image of grotesque abundance and Maudlin, the representative of maternal authority, becomes merely a loquacious gossip. Such stories render possibilities of female sacredness as proof of sin. Shakespeare and Webster seem to make claims about the pollution of pregnancy and childbirth only to undermine them in the end. Still,
both Hermione and the Duchess are figures of female royalty caught between competing narratives of femininity—one associated with sin and contamination, the other associated with sacredness and martyrdom, along with its own particular subversiveness—complicating the Protestant equation of female spirituality with wifehood and motherhood.
CHAPTER 3

“AH, WHO SHALL HINDER ME TO WAIL AND WEEP?”:
MOURNING, MEMORY, AND RITUALS OF DEATH

As early modern attitudes toward childbirth fostered a distinctly spiritualized view of women, in terms of both the sinful and the sacred, death afforded women an opportunity for extravagant expressiveness and spiritual authority. The Protestant spiritualization of domesticity, the changing views of ritual and redemption that so strongly impacted female religiosity, and the gendering of grief as female made the relationship of women to death and mourning both intricate and intimate. Women are repeatedly associated with death and memory in the period’s literature, an association that places them once again in positions of authority as ritual specialists.

Using the perspectives of new historical and performance criticism, I will examine how two of Shakespeare’s works, Richard III and Hamlet, reflect the distinctiveness of women’s approaches to death during the Reformation in their representations of feminine mourning. In each of these plays, lament lends characters a unique license to speak, so that acts of mourning and memorialism constitute both an assumption of authority and an affirmation of the self. In both works, what might seem on the surface to be a state of vulnerability and victimization—feminine mourning—becomes instead a vehicle for empowerment. In Richard III, Shakespeare grants female characters an otherwise unattainable degree of spiritual authority through ritual mourning. In Hamlet, on the other hand, he destabilizes contemporary notions of masculinity and grief by asserting the importance of mourning and memory through a male character who occupies a decidedly gendered position.

The connection between birth and death was a crucial point of Christian theology, compounded during the Reformation by dramatically changing views of the afterlife, of the
relationship between the living and the dead, and of the efficacy of death and mourning rituals. Though “birth in early modern England took place in a closed and muffled environment,” as David Cressy points out, and “death was followed by a throwing open of windows and doors,” the two stages were not considered opposites.¹ Death, in the view of many, was not birth’s contrast, but its complement, or even its continuation. The following excerpt from John Donne’s final sermon illustrates this connection between the beginning and the end of earthly existence:

Our very birth and entrance into this life is exitus à morte, an issue from death, for in our mother’s wombe wee are dead so, as that wee doe not know wee live… But then this exitus à morte is but introitus in mortem, this issue, this deliverance from that death, the death of the wombe, is an entrance, a delivering over to another death, the manifold deathes of this world. Wee have a winding sheete in our Mothers wombe… and wee come into the world, wound up in that winding sheet, for we come to seek a grave.²

Birth is both an exit and an entrance—an “exitus” and an “introitus”—from and into different forms of death. For Donne, and others, being born is merely the beginning of dying.

Writers and religionists in Reformation England frequently framed death and mourning in terms of the self, urging the living to be mindful of their inevitable end. In the words of the puritan William Perkins, “the life of a Christian is nothing els but a meditation of death.”³ The combination of a high mortality rate and low life expectancy meant that the danger of death was both pervasive and personal—one could escape neither the presence of the dead nor the ever-

The present possibility of joining them. The plague was perhaps the most potent reminder, both communally and individually, of death’s imminence and impartiality. Clare Gittings points out that “the lengthy bell-ringing involved in every burial kept death firmly in the mind,” a sentiment that reverberates throughout Donne’s writings, most famously in the line from his Meditation 17: “and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” Ralph Houlbrooke describes “preparation for death” as “the most important business of earthly existence” in early modern England, citing the following inscription from The Judd Memorial painting as evidence of the matter’s magnitude: “Lyve to dye and dye to lyve eternally.” According to such views, the chief goal of one’s life ought to be achieving readiness for one’s death, a sort of insurance for the afterlife.

Early modern attitudes towards the dead changed under the impact of the Reformation. Contrary to the Medieval Catholicism, which had in many ways fostered the connection between the living and the dead, early modern Protestantism demanded a more decisive separation between the two. The most difficult Catholic concept to purge from popular belief proved to be the doctrine of purgatory. So crucial to life were understandings of afterlife that Peter Marshall calls the Reformation rejection of purgatory “one of the most audacious attempts at the restructuring of beliefs and values ever attempted in England, a kind of collective cultural de-programming.” Purgatory was not strictly a theological doctrine, but a significant underpinning of the social structure as well—“part of a much broader, popular understanding of the meaning of existence, the nature of Christian faith, and the structure of family and community,” as

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4 Clare Gittings, Death, Burial, and the Individual, 8.
8 Ibid., 100.
Stephen Greenblatt explains. Belief in purgatory not only shaped one’s approach to death, but in many ways determined the course of one’s life.

The Reformation revision of attitudes toward death coincided with the emerging emphasis on female piety, resulting in the redirection or rejection of many of the death rituals women had come to manage. Reforming rituals that were related to purgatory must have been an overwhelming task, since such practices had served so many functions in Medieval Christianity. The idea that a deceased person’s soul would be sent to a particular place to be purged of its sins before ascending to heaven helped to resolve some theological tensions regarding the rigid dichotomies of heaven and hell, sin and righteousness, salvation and damnation, for instance. It also empowered the living to put their grief to good use, giving them the assurance that their actions could aid those loved ones who had gone on before them and the confidence that others would do the same for them when the time came. In addition to the many services surrounding the burial and interment, such as the Office of the Dead and Requiem Mass, other official rituals in which mourners could participate included: month’s minds (memorials one month after death), obits (yearly memorials of death), trentals (made up of 30 requiem masses each), distribution of doles or soul-cakes to the poor on behalf of the deceased, and chantries established specifically to pray for the soul of the deceased in order to ensure a shorter stay in purgatory.

Though chantries and other clerical rituals enjoyed great popularity, care for the status of purgatorial prisoners was not an exclusively priestly task. The lay person’s ability to finance such observances was a crucial contribution. In addition, as with childbirth rituals, members of the laity could perform many death rituals without so much ceremony and cost. As Greenblatt puts it, “nonspecialists understood that they could do things in their everyday lives to ease the

pain of those they loved or to shorten their own anticipated share of postmortem pain.”10 The ringing of the bells, for instance, was a routine part of life in early modern England, allowing all within hearing an opportunity to pray for souls in purgatory.11 Among the laity circulated stories of ghosts who came back to beg relatives for relief from their torments, which could be obtained only through “remembrance, in the form of the appropriate rituals.”12 This alone was enough to convince some of the reality of purgatory and its tortures, and to encourage them to make provisions for themselves and their loved ones. The observation by Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh that women’s “voices at times achieved their greatest power at the close of their own and others’ lives” suggests the importance of “rituals of remembrance” that were specifically feminine.13

Reformers could easily point to the fact that the Bible makes no mention of such a place as purgatory.14 The notion that one’s sins could be cleansed through purgatorial punishment also presented a “fundamental incompatibility with the idea of justification by faith alone,” as Marshall points out.15 Reformers resisted anything that competed with the sanctification made possible only through Christ’s sacrificial death, so they considered any ritual or idea whose claim was to alleviate or atone for sin essentially blasphemous.16 The Protestant ideals of sola fides and sola scriptura are evident, for instance, in the Chantries Act (1545, 1547), which begins.17

10 Stephen Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory, 16.
11 Peter Marshall, Beliefs and the Dead Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 161; Stephen Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory, 43. A good example of the universality of the bells is its customary use on All Hallows Eve. Bells rang continuously the night before All Saint’s Day, November 1, “as communities joined in prayers for the whole, vast company of the dead” (Greenblatt 19). This ritual not only accounts for the modern association of Halloween with the dead, but also demonstrates the strong bond between bell-ringing and communal memorialization.
12 Stephen Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory, 314.
15 Peter Marshall, Beliefs and the Dead, 57.
16 Ibid., 62.
considering that a great part of superstition and errors in Christian religion has been brought into the minds and estimations of men, by reason of the ignorance of their very true and perfect salvation through the death of Jesus Christ, and by devising and phantasing vain opinions of purgatory and masses satisfactory, to be done for them which be departed…¹⁸

Purgatory is merely a “vain opinion” resulting from “superstition,” “error,” and “ignorance.” If men knew the “very true and perfect salvation through the death of Jesus Christ” made clear throughout scripture (sola scriptura), they would have no need for “devising and phantasing” notions that rely on works rather than faith in Christ alone (sola fides).

The doctrine of purgatory was thus at odds with the Protestant understanding of salvation, as well as the doctrine of predestination, which denies that one has the ability to determine one’s election or damnation while living, much less by provisions made for the afterlife. Protestants also censured the Catholic Church for what they perceived as the material, emotional, and spiritual manipulation of followers through the concept of purgatory. These reformers faced the challenge of changing the cultural perception of death and the afterlife, no small task since such a vast network of rituals had been developed specifically to aid the dead (and to aid the living in coping with their loss).

The Protestant approach to death rendered human effort powerless—the dying person could die with no assurance of election and salvation, the bereaved could grieve with no hope of their loved one’s eternal status, the living could mourn with no way to help the dead. David Cressy says of the deceased that “though their bodies remained in the churchyard, the souls of departed protestants were now thought to be beyond the reach of intercessionary prayer.”¹⁹ The

¹⁸ Henry Gee and William John Hardy, eds., Documents Illustrative of Church History (1896), 328.
¹⁹ David Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death, 396.
official Elizabethan *Homilie or Sermon concerning Prayer* addresses the problem of prayer for the dead:

> Neither let us dreame any more, the soules of the dead are any thing at all holpen by our prayers: But as the Scripture teacheth us, let us thinke that the soule of man passing out of the body, goeth straightwayes either to heaven, or else to hell, whereof the one needeth no prayer, and the other is without redemption. The only Purgatory where in we must trust to be saved, is the death and bloud of Christ…

Like the Chantries Act, the homily refers readers to “the death and bloud Christ” as the only means of salvation. Further, this passage invalidates all rituals related to the idea of intermediary purgatorial punishment as it reminds its audience of the permanence of the soul’s positioning in the afterlife. Again, “Scripture” is called upon as truth while the notion of efficacious prayer for the dead is dismissed as a “dreame.” The homily further insists that at the moment of death, the soul “goeth straightwayes either to heaven, or else to hell,” leaving no room for second chances. The unsaved soul is once and for all “without redemption.” Without ritual intercessory prayer, “the living were left with their memories,” as Natalie Davis says, and the dead were bound to their destiny for good.

Reformation changes created a sense of desperation regarding deathbed repentance and fueled an already intense fear of the finality of one’s death. Purgatory had provided the comfort that “the border between this world and the afterlife was not firmly and irrevocably closed,” as Greenblatt says, but the Reformation insisted on closure. With the loss of purgatory and the

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20 “An Homilie or Sermon concerning Prayer,” *Certaine Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches In the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547-1571)*, ed. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), 122.
means of aid and comfort that accompanied it, what happened to the soul at the moment of death became absolute and irrevocable.\textsuperscript{23} Theologians argued that the soul went either to heaven or to hell instantly upon death, leaving little hope of postmortem pardon.\textsuperscript{24} As Houlbrooke asserts, after the Reformation, “the faith of the dying individual… assumed overriding importance” in light of the doctrine of predestination, while sacramental ritual was marginalized, if not eliminated, making the deathbed experience an entirely different one.\textsuperscript{25}

Because of the emphasis on the moment of death, the dying person’s final days served not only as an opportunity for repentance, but as an occasion for affirming faith (and election) or lack thereof. The early modern interest in dying a good death was not particularly Protestant; in fact, it descended from Medieval attitudes towards death.\textsuperscript{26} The theme of dying well continued throughout the Reformation in works that privileged the Protestant perspective on death. In a colloquy entitled \textit{The Funeral} (1526), Erasmus dramatizes the reformers’ perspective on the difference between a good deathbed experience and a bad one.\textsuperscript{27} Though Erasmus was not a reformer—“he did not believe that conditions within the visible Church, however deplorable,

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{23}] Clare Gittings, \textit{Death, Burial and the Individual}, 40.
\item[\textsuperscript{24}] Many Protestants still believed, however, that “the soul slept between death and the resurrection,” Ralph A. Houlbrooke, \textit{Death, Religion, and the Family}, 40.
\item[\textsuperscript{25}] Ibid., 154.
\item[\textsuperscript{26}] The late Medieval and early modern emphasis on dying well is perhaps best exemplified by \textit{The Book of the Craft of Dying}, a fifteenth-century translation of the \textit{Tractatus} text, often referred to as the \textit{Ars Moriendi}. A second version of the \textit{Ars Moriendi} includes a sequence of eleven woodcut illustrations, ten of which depict the five temptations of death and their correlating “inspirations”—unbelief, despair, impatience, spiritual pride, and excessive attachment to earthly things—all of which \textit{The Craft of Dying} addresses. This work showed up in different forms repeatedly throughout the period, an indication that lingering Medieval views of death and its rituals remained a topic of interest to the early modern believer. See Chapter 1 in Nancy Lee Beaty, \textit{The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); Ralph A. Houlbrooke, \textit{Death, Religion, and the Family}, 149-151.
\end{itemize}
justified secession from it,” according to Craig R. Thompson—he did align himself with many of Luther’s ideas for reform within the Church, including those he affirms in *The Funeral*.28

The colloquy is a dialogue between Marcophalus and Phaedrus, who has recently witnessed the deaths of two friends, George and Cornelius. Marcophalus, who says he has “never had the experience of being present at a deathbed” asks Phaedrus, “which man’s death seemed more Christian?”29 Phaedrus goes on to describe first the elaborate death of George, a man of some wealth and importance. George had several physicians at his disposal, though none of them could determine the nature of his ailment. He made arrangements for trentals, dirges, and masses for his nearly departed soul. His deathbed was surrounded by priests, friars, and monks, all of whom argued about everything from who should give the last rites to who should come first in the ostentatious funeral procession that had been planned.

In contrast, Cornelius, sensing that he was nearing death due to illness, “went to church, confessed to his parish priest, heard sermon and Mass, devoutly took Communion, and returned home” the Sunday before he died. He had but one physician, and “didn’t even take to his bed except for the last day and part of the night on which he left this earth.” He spent the last four days of his life comforting his grieving family, making arrangements to give to the poor, reading from the Bible, and helping his friends. When his priest asks him about preparations against purgatory, Cornelius is said to have responded:

> Pastor, I’ll be none the worse off if no bell tolls; or if you deem me worthy of one burial service, that will be more than enough… I do not desire to buy up someone’s prayers or deprive anyone of his merits. There is sufficient abundance of merits in Christ, and I

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29 Desiderius Erasmus, “The Funeral,” 359-60.
have faith that the prayers and merits of the whole Church will benefit me only if I am a true member of it.\textsuperscript{30}

Through this dialogue Erasmus asserts the Christian virtue in dying a simple death, a death unencumbered by ecclesiastical excess and material wealth. He also discredits purgatory, praising Cornelius’ focus on the “sufficient abundance of merits in Christ.” Though Cornelius obviously celebrates Catholic traditions—he goes to confession, then to Mass to take communion—his approach to death resonates with the reformers’ revisions of the dead and the afterlife. Marcophalus’ response to the story of the death of Cornelius punctuates Erasmus’ point: “I’ve never heard of a death less troublesome.”\textsuperscript{31}

Protestant writers and preachers encouraged this sort of simple, peaceful transition from this world to the next, urging believers not to fall back on old ways of thinking and superstition to comfort them in their fear and uncertainty. While they attempted to expunge the concept of purgatory, however, reformers could not expect to eradicate the issues and emotions such a concept had addressed, nor could they assume that popular ritual was altogether dependent on it.\textsuperscript{32} Chantries, for example, often took the form of charitable institutions, such as hospitals and almshouses, whose deceased founders were the subjects of regular prayers and masses. Because of their service to the community, doing away with such institutions entirely was a tricky matter. Some rituals were more obviously tied to religion, but others had been so embedded in the social structure that their complete eradication would have been impossible.

Rather than merely eliminating such practices altogether, then, reformers had to restructure “rituals of remembrance” to affirm Protestant theology.\textsuperscript{33} Peter Marshall tracks

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 370-71.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 373.
\textsuperscript{32} Stephen Greenblatt, \textit{Hamlet in Purgatory}, 315.
\textsuperscript{33} Peter Marshall, \textit{Beliefs and the Dead}, 108.
changes in the epitaphs and inscriptions found on monuments, for instance, to show the increasing influence of humanism, “upholding the individual” and his or her personal legacy. The funeral sermon became a popular form of commemoration, a tangible way of documenting and giving honor to a person’s life. 34 Similarly, sonnets, odes, and elegies were common vehicles of praise and preservation. Shakespeare, for example, affirms the power of poetry as a form of remembrance when he writes of his own work in Sonnet 18, “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”35 Still, the point at which memorialism was either confused with intercession or considered overindulgent seems to have remained a concern. In 1628, nearly a century after the Chantries Act, writer George Shaw urges readers to:

lay to heart the death of others, that so our harts may be in the house of mourning… therefore if we heare of any that be dead let us thinke it might have beeene our own turne as well as theirs… To which end let us frequent funerall Sermons, for there may we both see with our eyes, and heare with our eares, that which will put us in minde of our mortalitie and end; for every grave and tombe be monuments to put us in minde of death.36

Echoing Donne and many others, Shaw reminds readers that when they “heare of any that be dead” they should “thinke it might have been our own turne as well as theirs.” He encourages the practice of attending “funerall Sermons” not as a means of aiding or even honoring the deceased, but as a meditation on one’s own mortality. Each “grave” and “tombe” has become

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34 Ibid., 270; 265-67.
for Shaw a “monument” to the “minde” of the living rather than a help or commemoration to the soul of the dead.

A subtle change in the officially sanctioned burial service suggests that even the burial itself became more about the living than the dead, as many scholars have noted. In 1549, the priest is instructed to say the following while “casting earth upon the Corps”: “Commende…thy body to the grounde, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, duste to duste….” After 1552, this portion of the service reads: “we therfor committee hys bodye to the grounde, earthe, to earthe; ashes, to ashes, dust, to dust…” The substitution of the pronoun “hys” for “thy” reflects a significant change in perspective concerning the status of the deceased. In the earlier version, the priest speaks directly to the dead person, as if he or she is still a part of the community and is still present among them. In the later version, however, the priest addresses only the living audience and refers to the dead in third person, clearly delineating a separation and encouraging the mourners to turn their focus away from the deceased and toward the self.

While religious writers and clergy exhorted men and women alike to meditate on their own mortality, women in early modern England participated in the actual practices surrounding death more frequently and more intimately than did men. The reformers’ emphasis on the final moments of one’s life must have especially impacted the women who played such prominent roles during the deathbed experience. After all, women were specifically charged with the task of mourning and remembering the dead, and like birth rituals, many death rituals took place in the female domestic space. Most people in early modern England died at home, “the traditional

place both for entering the world and for leaving it,” as Clare Gittings points out.⁴⁰ Women typically assumed responsibility for the domestic duties associated with the deathbed, such as “nursing the dying, washing and winding the corpse, ‘watching’ the body during its period of laying-out, lamenting within the home, serving as mourners for funerals, and donning mourning garments.”⁴¹ David Cressy notes that midwives often performed such duties because of the similarities between “winding a corpse” and “swaddling a child.”⁴² This, of course, resonates with Donne’s image of “the winding sheet” present both in birth and in death.

Women also had a special relationship to illness and death because of their connection to healing—many were skilled nurses and had extensive knowledge of herbs and other remedies.⁴³ For women, the practical task of attending to the physical needs of the sick was inseparable from the spiritual obligation of providing comfort, support, and guidance to the afflicted individual. As Ralph Houlbrook points out, “visiting other people’s deathbeds was a charitable work,” but it was also an exercise in personal spiritual discipline as it was “a helpful means of reminding oneself of what lay ahead.”⁴⁴ Although men called on their dying friends and relatives as well, this office was more frequently filled by women, who were likely more familiar with the anxiety and trauma of impending death because of their own often harrowing childbirth experiences. Indeed, when a woman died in childbirth, it was customary in some places for pregnant women to be her pallbearers. Though Gittings remarks that this practice emphasized “the continuation of mankind” by its juxtaposition of death and new life, it also would have served to remind the

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⁴² David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 429; See also Patricia Phillippy, who notes the correlation between the development undertaking as an occupation at the end of the seventeenth century and the preparation of corpses for burial by women prior to that time, “London’s Mourning Garment,” 321.
⁴⁴ Ibid., 69.
childbearing woman of the peril she faced in order to encourage her to prepare herself for the real possibility that she, too, could die.45

If a woman survived childbirth, her new maternal role would afford her another unique perspective on death. The rate of infant mortality in early modern England was so high that, as Gittings writes, “it was common practice to name a newborn child after a living older brother or sister on the assumption that only one of them would reach adulthood.”46 That changing views of infant baptism were a steady source of debate and dissension speaks to the relevance of such a topic in this period.47 Certainly, the death of a child would have impacted fathers and mothers alike, but the gendering of grief created an inherent difference in paternal and maternal expressions of mourning. The masculine response to loss was typically violence or stoicism, while the feminine response involved “weeping and wailing,” as Jennifer Vaught observes.48

Reformers figured responses to grief as both gendered and spiritualized. As Patricia Phillippy observes, “women’s concern with the body of the departed, rather than the soul, characterizes their excessive grief in texts authored by both men and women.”49 The “rejection of Catholic spirituality,” Phillippy notes, rendered “moderate, internal grief” both valuable and masculine, while it called for the criticism of “external demonstrations of sorrow,” aligning such outward behaviors both “with femininity and with Catholicism.”50 Additionally, according to humoral theory and medical ideas regarding the womb, the mother’s grief was connected to her body as well as her heart, which accounts for its frequent characterization as excessive,

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45 Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual*, 118.
46 Ibid., 7.
50 Ibid., 8.
obsessive, and ultimately incurable. The maternal mourner would not have experienced the same pressures of propriety as the bereaved father; a grief-stricken mother’s immoderate mourning was both anticipated and acceptable. Phillippy thus describes paternal mourning as “copious in private” yet “stoic in public,” and observes the tendency of the male mourner to shift his focus from personal grief to the larger spiritual or political ramifications of such sorrow.

This shift from the specific to the general is present even in a poem as personal as Ben Jonson’s “On My First Son.” The speaker begins by expressing grief for the loss of his “child,” whom he tenderly calls his “joy” and “loved boy” (1-2). Following what appears to be an outburst—“O could I lose all father now!”—the speaker immediately switches his focus from his specific experience to the human experience in a move that creates emotional distance for the grieving father (5). The personal “I” becomes the more general “man”: “For why/ Will man lament the state he should envy,/ To have so soon ’scaped world’s and flesh’s rage/ And, if no other misery, age?” (6-8). When the speaker returns to his personal grief in the next line, he does so in a more controlled manner than before, using his vocation as a metaphorical representation of his paternal affection: “Here doth lie/ Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry” (9-10). In its vacillation between the personal and the general, as well as passion and rationality, Jonson’s poem embodies the ambivalence a grieving father might have felt.

Shakespeare perhaps best shows the tension between the culturally prescribed masculine approach to grief and the enormity of paternal loss in Macbeth when Macduff learns that his wife and children have been murdered. He is obviously in shock upon receiving the news and has

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51 Patricia Phillippy, “‘I might againe have been the Sepulcure’: Paternal and Maternal Mourning in Early Modern England,” in Grief and Gender: 700-1700, ed. Jennifer C. Vaught (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 203.
52 Patricia Phillippy, “‘I might againe have been the Sepulcure,’” 202.
difficulty formulating a response—Malcolm urges him to “give sorrow words,” but all Macduff can manage is, “My children too?” and a few lines later, “My wife killed too?” (4.3.210; 212; 216). Malcolm, representing the stereotypically stoical male reaction, suggests that seeking vengeance will alleviate the pain of loss: “Let’s make medicines of our great revenge/To cure this deadly grief” (4.3.215-16). This suggestion is to Macduff evidence that Malcolm cannot understand his position—“he has no children”—and in a moving moment, Macduff reveals his anguish and paternal affection:

All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam

At one fell swoop? (4.3.217-20)

To Malcolm’s advice that he should “dispute it like a man,” Macduff responds:

I shall do so,

But I must also feel it as a man.

I cannot but remember such things were

That were most precious to me… (4.3.221-22)

Macduff here equates memory to emotion—he “cannot but remember” and to remember is to “feel.” Malcolm urges Macduff to let his “grief/Convert to anger.” When Macduff replies, “I will not play the woman with mine eyes/And braggart with my tongue,” Malcolm says simply, “This tune goes manly” (4.3.231-33; 238). Although Macduff shows his sorrow, in the end, he is compelled to conform to the masculine approach to mourning (and is praised for it).

Mourning in general, and female mourning especially, enabled the external expression of internal suffering. Houlbrooke distinguishes grief from mourning in the following way: “Grief
is suffering caused by deprivation and loss…Mourning embraces all grief’s outward behavioral manifestations.” Perhaps anticipating Hamlet’s description of grief as “that within which passes show” and mourning as “the trappings and the suits of woe” (1.2.85-86), Richard says in Shakespeare’s Richard II:

… my grief lies all within,
And these external manner of laments
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief
That swells with silence in the tortured soul. (4.1.285-88)

Though the “shadows” of “unseen grief” could never adequately communicate the pain of “the tortured soul,” the “external manner of laments” to which Richard and Hamlet refer serve other purposes as well. Grief has to do with acknowledging the absence of a loved one, but mourning is more about memorializing that person’s presence in some form. Further, while memorialization is about the preservation of the deceased, to be sure, it also has to do with the mourner’s understanding and expression of the self.

Mourning and memory have a direct correlation to the identity of the mourner. This connection is especially significant with regard to women, whose opportunities for self-definition and expression were limited by the perimeters of cultural and religious prescriptions. The link between female mourning, memory, and identity also has to do with the association of madness with grief. In King John, for example, Constance enters in Act 3, scene 4 “distracted, with her hair about her ears,” an indication that she is out of her wits. To Pandolf’s accusation, “Lady, you utter madness, and not sorrow,” Constance replies:

Thou art not holy to belie me so.
I am not mad: this hair I tear is mine;

54 Ralph A. Houlbrooke, Death, Religion, and the Family, 220.
My name is Constance; I was Geoffrey’s wife;
Young Arthur is my son; and he is lost.
I am not mad; I would to God I were,
For then ’tis like I should forget myself.
O, if I could, what grief should I forget! (3.4.43-50)

“Madness,” Pandolf insinuates, can be disregarded more quickly than “sorrow,” and Constance is aware of the authority she stands to lose if she does not distinguish her grief from insanity; twice she declares in this short passage, “I am not mad.” To plead her case, she first deliberately defines herself by her loss—she was “Geoffrey’s wife” and “Young Arthur’s” mother. She then makes a claim about the relationship of memory to grief and to the self: “For then ’tis like I should forget myself./ O, if I could, what grief should I forget!” The strength of sorrow lies in memory, and Constance assumes that madness impacts memory. If she were mad, she reasons, she not only would forget her “grief” but she would indeed forget herself. This makes the self synonymous with the pain the self endures, insofar as Constance can only define herself by her loss. That Constance equates forgetting her grief with forgetting herself also signifies the extent to which mourning and memory are essentially narcissistic.

Whether used to change the circumstances of the dead in the spiritual realm, to ensure “post-mortem ‘fame’” in the secular realm, or to vindicate a wrongful death, acts of mourning kept memory alive.55 An understanding of memory as active and efficacious—a form of spiritual authority in which memorialization makes a difference—complicates the question of why women in particular were given the task of remembering the dead, especially considering

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55 For a lengthier discussion of the shift in focus from intercessory prayer to “the quest for personal ‘immortality’ on the things of this life rather than the next,” often associated with the rise of “individualism,” see Peter Marshall, Beliefs and the Dead, 276. Refer also to Clare Gittings, Death, Burial and the Individual, Philippe Ariès, The Hour of our Death, and Robert N. Watson, The Rest is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
certain modifications brought about by reformers. Still, the period’s literature frequently represents women as the keepers of death and mourning rituals. Marshall quotes a letter written to Sir Thomas Chaloner around 1600 in which the author describes this burial rite:

when any dieth certaine women singe a songe to the dead body, recitinge the jorney that the partie deceased must goe, and they are of beliefe (such is their fondness) that once in their lives yt is good to give a payre of newe shoes to a poore man, forasmuch as after this life they are to passe barefoote through a greate launde full of thornes and furzen, except by the meryte of the almes aforesaid, they have redeemed their forfeyte; for at the edge of the launde an aulde man shall meet them with the same shoes that were given by the partie when he was lyving; and, after he hath shodde them, dismisseth them to go through thick and thin without scratch or scall.\(^{56}\)

The writer describes a female led ritual—“certaine women” who “singe a songe to the dead body”—that reflects a strong connection to a ritual belief (mere “fondness,” as the writer calls it) not at all religious in nature. The idea that upon dying a person would have to “passe barefoote through a greate aunde full of thornes and furzen” if during life he or she had neglected “to give a payre of newe shoes to a poore man” opposes Protestant teachings on the soul’s transition from death to afterlife. Such a belief also relies not only on a degree of superstition, but on the notion that one’s actions in life could affect one’s destiny in death. Significantly, the writer takes note of the “certaine women” whose task it is to maintain such a ritual, even as late as the turn of the century.

Although reformers attempted to renegotiate and replace these rituals, they would have had a far easier time passing legislation on the matter than ensuring change in the hearts of believers. Even those who thought they had changed might easily fall back on familiar rituals as

\(^{56}\) Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 138.
a safeguard—just in case. Representations of death and mourning in the period’s drama could heighten anxieties regarding the power of female ritual. In the case of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, in which mourning is the work of women—Lady Anne, Margaret, Queen Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York—lamentation figures as a form of spiritual authority.

The stage presence of female ritual mourning serves at least three purposes in *Richard III*: the exposition of past events, the propulsion of the play’s plot, and the particular power of female memorialism. In her discussion of the play’s female characters, Madonne M. Miner asserts that even though they are presented as “currency,” their value “cannot be completely destroyed.”57 I shall argue, however, that the power of women in *Richard III* is neither accidental nor residual, but intentional and integral. Feminine power in the play measures up to more than survival against great odds. That is, rather than merely reacting admirably to unjust circumstances, the female characters use those circumstances to exert influence aggressively. The context of grief provides the women with a means of agency that is specifically feminine. What Nina S. Levine calls “ambivalent” traits—she says the women “slide with unsettling ease between opposing moral stereotypes, between victim and aggressor, nurturer and murderer”—are actually less contradictory and more compatible than they might seem at first glance.58 That the women’s lamentations result in a lust for revenge is not so much a sign of ambivalence as an assumption of authority and an assertion of the self. Moreover, the “memorial function” of female mourning in the play does more than point to the “continued relevance of history’s

losses,” as Phillippy claims; in many ways, memory through female mourning determines the future.⁵⁹

Grief in Richard III cannot be separated from the desire for retribution, a desire that has as much to do with the identity of the victim as that of the perpetrator. In his introduction to the play, however, Stephen Greenblatt focuses on the offender to the detriment of the offended. He claims that the “chorus of grief-crazed women” exemplifies the play’s underlying “ritual process—the inexorable working out of retributive justice or nemesis through the agency of Richard.”⁶⁰ Greenblatt is referring specifically to Act 4, scene 4, during which Margaret, Queen Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York “tease out the strict eye-for-an-eye logic of the action” through a series of laments and curses aimed at Richard. Ultimately, Greenblatt seems to privilege the curses over the laments, concluding that “the ritual that lingers over the play is an exorcism”—the obliteration of what he calls “the demonic master,” the traditional Vice character. While ritual exorcism may hang heavily over the play—if ever a title character proved in performance worthy of this linguistic centrality, it’s Richard—female ritual mourning has as powerful a presence. The laments, in other words, give the curses their rhetorical and emotional force—and perhaps even their efficacy.

Scenes of female lament and cursing are scattered throughout the play, establishing a presence that is consistent and widespread. From a performance criticism perspective, ritual mourning as a form of female agency has a compelling presence in the production of Richard III only when the women’s roles remain intact; cutting even one of them drastically lessens the impact of their collective power. If, as Marliss Desens argues, “Shakespeare appears to have been at pains to heighten the ritualistic nature of the play in connection with the female

⁵⁹ Patricia Phillippy, Women, Death, and Literature, 127.
characters,” then cutting of the women’s roles results in the disappearance of the “close linkage of the women with the supernatural and the ritualistic, both of which Richard is attempting to subvert and destroy.” Each of the play’s women has a specific complaint and cause of grief. Although they convey similar notions about Richard, the result of trying to conflate these women into a single female character is a reductive representation in which the particular connection of women to death and mourning loses its power.

Whenever a female character in Richard III takes the stage in lament, Richard himself is sure to follow close behind. The effect of Richard’s presence repeatedly juxtaposed alongside such forceful female expression of grief and outrage is twofold. Obviously, that Richard is able to conquer both Lady Anne and Queen Elizabeth just after their intense invectives against him shows his power as a rhetorician and actor. Yet, the frequency with which these scenes occur—scenes of lament and rage interrupted by Richard—also indicates his inability to rid himself of these tell-tale women,” who, as he says, “rail on the Lord’s anointed” (4.4.150-1). Marliss Desens labels the ritual expression of Richard III’s female characters a “process of penance,” a reading that makes the women’s lamentations entirely about Richard. While female ritual mourning is certainly necessary for Richard’s character during the life of the play insofar as it both explains the past and propels the plot, it has some intrinsic value as well.

Female lamentation in this play is perhaps more about the mourners than their motivation; that is, the purpose of the laments is to empower the women who speak them rather than to punish Richard. The idea of ritual mourning as feminine power is introduced early in the

62 Having recently performed the role of Lady Anne in a production that maintained the integrity of all of the women’s roles, I cannot overstate the importance of these characters in performance not only to the play as a whole, but to one another.
play, when Lady Anne laments the death of King Henry (1.2). In production, this scene can be as elaborate as a royal funeral procession or as simplified as a few men carrying a casket; what is most critically on display in this case is not so much the representation of funeral pomp as the rhetorical authority of Anne’s language of lament. The preceding stage direction in fact suggests the presence on stage of as few people as possible—enough to carry the corpse and “Lady Anne, being the mourner.”

That Anne is specified as “the mourner” could indicate several things. Anne’s assumption of this role suggests her subversive potential since, as Phillippy points out, she is blatantly violating the “College of Arms rules for noble funerals,” which specify that the deceased and the chief mourner should be of the same sex.64 Notably, she is the only woman in a group of traveling men and the only one of the group to “obsequiously lament” the deceased (1.2.3). Like the “certaine women” in Sir Thomas Chaloner’s letter who “singe a songe to the dead body,” Anne is the appointed performer of ritual. Anne’s presence as “the mourner” also establishes her character in other specific ways: her unrestrained speech affirms the agency she assumes as a female mourner; her grief indicates not only her relationship to the dead, but her now precarious place within the royal family; and her boldness suggests at once an air of desperation and assurance.

One wonders if Anne would have the boldness to confront and the verbal capacity to combat Richard in this way were she not in a state of mourning, a state accompanied by an assumption of authority, or were she not actually with the body of the dead. After all, her resolve is not invincible and by the scene’s end, she has surrendered. Like the earlier version of the prayer book’s burial service, Anne addresses the corpse directly throughout her first speech. “Be it lawful that I invocate thy ghost/ To hear the lamentations of poor Anne,” she says,

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64 Patricia Phillippy, *Women, Death, and Literature*, 133.
revealing at once her belief that her father-in-law is not completely gone and her acknowledgment that this belief is somehow transgressive (1.2.8-9). Though what is not “lawful” can certainly be related to the conjuring of spirits, Anne is possibly referring here to her desire to talk to and to be heard by the dead. Indeed, such a desire hints at the “Catholic belief in the affective power of mourning and prayer to influence the soul’s fate” after death, as Phillippy notes.\(^65\)

The structure of the speech makes clear that Anne’s laments are not just performative, though certainly there are elements of performance in all of this play’s lamentations. Shakespeare indicates that Anne is actually crying—“Lo, in these windows that let forth thy life/ I pour the helpless balm of my poor eyes” (1.2.12-13)—and reinforces this action by constructing the speech so that its vowel sounds, when allowed to resonate in the back of the throat, create a vocal quality well suited to tears. Anne is in a raw emotional state from the outset of the scene. Again signaling the significance of his language through technique, this time with anaphora, Shakespeare leads Anne from crying to cursing:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \text{ cursed be the hand that made these holes,} \\
\text{Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence,} \\
\text{Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it.} \\
\text{More direful hap betide that hated wretch} \\
\text{That makes us wretched by the death of thee…(1.2.14-18)}
\end{align*}
\]

In this passage, Anne moves her curse from an emphasis on physicality and action—“the hand that made these holes,” “the blood that let this blood from hence”—to questions of spirituality and motive—“the heart that had the heart to do it.” Anne’s train of thought goes then from

Richard’s depraved “heart” to a call for retribution, and Anne the mourner becomes a self-proclaimed figure of divine justice and spiritual authority.

Indeed, the transitional nature of this scene—that the body has been “Taken from Paul’s to be interrèd” at Chertsey—mirrors, in many ways, the liminality of purgatory (1.2.29-30). It is no accident that Richard chooses to interrupt this progression. “The devil,” as Anne calls him, has set about distracting the dead soul’s lone mourner (an “angel,” as Richard himself says) and protector during this transition from funeral to final resting place (1.2.45). Henry’s body is on a literal “journey,” like the imagined one in Chaloner’s letter. Here as in the letter, safe passage depends on female ritual. Clearly, the guards whose duty it is to ensure an unobstructed procession are not up to the task. The halberdier makes a momentary stand against Richard—“My lord, stand back and let the coffin pass”—only to relent as soon as Richard threatens him. The only one in the funeral procession who does not cower at Richard’s entrance is the mourner:

“What, do you tremble? Are you all afraid?” she asks. Anne then assumes the role of guardian by ordering Richard away from Henry’s corpse: “Avaunt, thou dreadful minister of hell” (1.2.43). In Anne’s initial reaction to Richard there is a sense of the pre-Reformation ambiguity about the soul’s precise location after death: “Thou hadst but power over his mortal body;/ His soul thou canst not have; therefore be gone” (1.2.47-48). The implication is that Anne must protect not only the King’s body, but his soul, which is somehow at risk in the diabolic presence of Richard. That is, Anne expects to impact the status of Henry’s soul, an idea that sounds a great deal like intercessory prayer for the dead.

A few lines later, however, Anne seems to align herself with the Reformation belief that the soul went “straightwayes either to heaven, or else to hell,” as the Homilie or Sermon concerning Prayer asserts. She is suddenly quite certain of her father-in-law’s whereabouts:
“He is in heaven, where thou shalt never come” (1.2.106). Her claim is complicated, however, by her insistent focus on the body and her allusions to superstitious beliefs. For instance, she sees the corpse’s bleeding wounds: “O gentlemen, see, see! Dead Henry’s wounds/ Ope their congealèd mouths and bleed afresh,” a reference to the superstition that a murderer’s presence in front of his victim would cause the wounds to bleed again (1.2.55-56). Her repeated addresses to the corpse also indicate a reliance on superstition and a pre-Reformation understanding of the dead. In this sense, Richard plays not the devil but the iconoclast, the reformer whose task it is to disrupt and destroy “devoted charitable deeds” that reek of popery. In this scene Richard contains and redirects female ritual authority. He makes a similar attempt to regulate female ritual later in the play when he, somewhat bizarrely, blames his shriveled arm on women’s “witchcraft” (3.4.72).

That the audience actually sees this image—a female mourner crying and cursing over the corpse of a loved one—early in the play is important. Though we do not see, for example, Queen Elizabeth weeping over the bodies of her “gentle babes” (4.1.9), the staging of 1.2 establishes a visual point of reference that the remainder of the play recalls repeatedly as it pushes this point: the mourning of women is powerful, both rhetorically and spiritually, because of their connection to the dead. The transference happens even within this scene, as Anne begins to conflate the death of her father-in-law, whose body is present, and that of her husband, who was “stabbed by the self-same hand” (1.2.11). After this scene, the dead bodies so bitterly mourned are conspicuously absent throughout the rest of the play. The audience sees the corpses of neither Edward nor Clarence, for example, whose deaths are the subject of an entire scene’s worth of laments. Perhaps more striking is the ambiguity of the location of the children’s dead bodies. When Richard asks Tyrrell if he saw the children “dead” and “buried,” he replies: “The
chaplain of the Tower hath buried them; But where, to say the truth, I do not know” (4.3.29-30). That the play insists on the absence of bodies after 1.2 heightens the importance of the women’s lamentations. Though the bodies of the dead are nowhere to be found, the female characters refuse to let them be forgotten.

When it comes to Queen Elizabeth, Margaret, and the Duchess, the text makes a clear connection between mourning that is specifically maternal and a sense of prophetic, inevitable justice. Interestingly, these maternal mourners also reveal a strong sense of competition with one another: one’s loss is amplified by another’s and what results is a sort of duel of lamentation. One can see the potential power and peculiar pride of mourning first when Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York argue over who has the greatest cause for grief (2.2.34-88). Queen Elizabeth enters “with her hair about her ears,” with a rhetorical question that encapsulates the extremity, tenacity, and authority of female mourning: “Ah, who shall hinder me to wail and weep?” (2.2.34). Elizabeth’s question calls attention to the exceptional authority granted to women in mourning, especially significant in a society in which female silence was idealized. To Elizabeth’s wailing and weeping the Duchess responds:

Thou art a widow, yet thou art a mother,
And hast the comfort of thy children left.
But death hath snatched my husband from mine arms
And plucked two crutches from my feeble hands,
Clarence and Edward. O what cause have I,
Thine being but a moiety of my moan,
To overgo thy woes, and drown thy cries? (2.2.55-61)
The Duchess claims superiority in grief, insisting to Elizabeth that she can “overgo [her] woes” and “drown [her] cries.” The basis for her claim is maternity—to be a “widow” yet still to be a “mother” creates “but a moiety” of the grief caused by the loss of children. Elizabeth still “hast the comfort of [her] children left” and therefore cannot compete with the Duchess. Her claim affirms contemporary notions of the magnitude of maternal mourning, even above other types of mourning.

Elizabeth does eventually attain the Duchess’ level of grief, as she laments the loss of her sons:

If yet your gentle souls fly in the air,
And be not fixed in doom perpetual
Hover about me with your airy wings
And hear your mother’s lamentation. (4.4.11-14)

Like Anne, Elizabeth addresses the deceased directly, expressing the desire to be seen and heard by them. That Elizabeth questions if her sons’ souls are yet “fixed in doom perpetual” or if they “fly in the air” indicates once again the ambiguity of the soul’s location in death. Like the children’s bodies, which are buried in some undisclosed spot, their souls cannot be accounted for with certainty. She seems to hope that, like angels with “airy wings,” they “hover about” her where they can bear witness to her grief—an odd desire, considering the implications a soul’s delayed departure for heaven might bring to mind. The Duchess similarly alludes to this ambiguity as she later curses Richard: “My prayers on the adverse party fight/ And there the little souls of Edward’s children/ Whisper the spirits of thine enemies” (4.4.191-93). The Duchess’ prayers are an interesting reversal of the Homily’s instruction on intercessory prayer: “Neither let us dreame any more, the soules of the dead are any thing at all holpen by our
prayers.” Both Elizabeth and the Duchess expect the souls of the deceased children to aid the living, rather than the other way around.

The deaths of the children evoke another battle for “the benefit of seniory” in grief, this time with Margaret (4.4.36). “Tell o’er your woes again by viewing mine,” she says, and continues:

I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him;
I had a husband, till a Richard killed him.
[To Elizabeth] Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him;
Thou hadst a Richard till a Richard killed him. (4.4.40-44)

Committed to the notion of justice measure for measure, Margaret goes so far as to call the death of young York (“Richard,” above) “but boot,” a bonus merely to even things out since both of Elizabeth’s sons “Matched not the high perfection” of her son (4.4.65-66).

Margaret especially poises herself as an instrument of divine retribution, though it is unclear if her prophecies are efficacious in their own right or are merely declarations of the predestined future. Either way, her predictions come to pass, one by one. Bryan Crocket claims that Margaret “enlarges the arena” of the play’s plot; that is, not only does she serve as a “constant reminder of political history,” but also as proof of the “cosmic proportions” of tyranny.66 As an agent of both exposition and premonition, Margaret links the past to the future. In this sense, Margaret’s voice could be a representation of providence, or perhaps even predestination. For women like Margaret, who have virtually no other power, mournful cursing provides an avenue of agency. Margaret responds to Elizabeth’s plea, “teach me how to curse my enemies,” in this way:

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Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days;

Compare dead happiness with living woe;

Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,

And he that slew them fouler than he is. (4.4.118-121)

Margaret offers a prescription for mourning that fosters vindication. Significantly, she emphasizes ritualism as she encourages Elizabeth to participate in outward signs of grief and to bathe herself in the agony of her loss: “Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days;/Compare dead happiness with living woe…” Margaret then turns to the idea of memory as a form of empowerment: “Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,” she tells the Queen, asserting that the construction of one’s memory is, in many ways, the prerogative of the mourner. As the King remarks in All’s Well That Ends Well, “Praising what is lost/ Makes the remembrance dear” (5.3.19-20). How Elizabeth shapes her remembrance of her boys can propel her forward in her revenge on “he that slew them”; memory is tantamount to power and agency here.

The shared experience of grief and the desire for vengeance brings the play’s female characters into alliance with one another. Not only does Elizabeth turn to Margaret when her children are killed, but both the Duchess and Elizabeth show sympathy for Anne when she is called to become Richard’s wife (4.1), and the Duchess and Elizabeth unite to “smother” Richard “in the breath of bitter words” (4.4.133). To see the women’s camaraderie as evidence of “tragic dignity,” as Miner does, seems inadequate in this case. More than merely offering consolation and comfort to one another in their loss, the women join forces to bring about justice through remembrance. Though Levine refers to the scene in which the Duchess and Elizabeth curse Richard together as “a perversion of maternal power,” it is actually maternal power at its fullest

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67 Madonna M. Miner, “Neither mother, wife, nor England’s queen,” 47.
expression, as it was understood in their period. In a barrage of accusations and questions, the Duchess and Elizabeth force Richard to remember: “where are my children?; “where is thy brother Clarence?”; “where is the gentle Rivers, Vaughan, Gray?”; “where is kind Hastings?” (4.4.144-48). In this scene as in previous scenes of lament, the women assume an authority unique to female mourning—specifically maternal here—and their prime mode of attack is memorialism.

The memory that the mourning women of Richard III have fought so hard to maintain is literally brought to life in the scene that precedes the battle. The idea that effective prayer for the souls of the dead is a “dreame,” as the official homily states, materializes in this play in the form of actual dreams in which the souls of the dead make a difference to the living. An interesting twist on the tales of ghosts returning from purgatory in search of a remedy for their torment, the ghosts appear to Richmond as he sleeps not to plead for help, but to provide it. One at a time, the ghosts urge Richmond to victory, while they condemn Richard to “despair and die” in the ensuing battle. Two of the ghosts even mention prayer specifically: Clarence (“the wrongèd heirs of York do pray for thee”) and Anne (“Thy adversary’s wife doth pray for thee”) (5.5.91; 120). This paradoxical representation—the reverse of the normal scenario in which the spirits of the dead seek help from the living—facilitates the Protestant revision of death and the afterlife. This is the moment at which the audience sees for the first time the bodies of the dead, which have been dislocated up to this point in the play. The ambiguity of the location of the corpses has made explicit the separation between the living and the dead; the reappearance of the bodies here, in the form of ghosts, only reinforces that separation. The interaction between the living and dead is not only one-sided, but fictionalized, in a sense—it is, after all, a dream.

Significantly, once the dead are able to speak for themselves no female characters reappear. The

68 Nina S. Levine, “‘Accursed womb, the bed of death,’” 23.
ghosts serve, then, as an embodiment of memory, a metaphorical representation of the result of the female mourning that has fuelled much of the play’s action.

In the end, it is memory that actually determines the outcome of the battle, if we are to believe in the effectiveness of these ghosts. Richard will “despair and die” precisely because of the power of memory, as each ghost indicates: “Think how thou stabbedst me in my prime of youth” (Edward); “Think on the tower and me” (King Henry); “Tomorrow in the battle think on me” (Clarence and Anne); “Let me sit heavy on thy soul tomorrow” (Rivers); “Let us be lead within thy bosom” (the princes); “Think upon Gray”; “Think upon Vaughan”; “Think on Lord Hastings”; “O in the battle think on Buckingham.” Insofar as they have borne the burden of memory throughout the play, the women of Richard III are in many ways responsible for Richard’s downfall.

While the resolution of Richard III depends on the spiritual authority the play’s lamenting women assume, the resolution of Hamlet shows how the failure of female memory forces a refiguring of masculinity and grief. Shakespeare once again emphasizes the potential of memory through Hamlet, the character in whom he most fully depicts the difficulties of grief and mourning—the dynamic between the two within the mind of the mourner, as well as the relationship of the grief-stricken individual to those who do not share in his or her grief. Though not a female character, Hamlet does occupy the gendered space of grief and comes to represent many things considered feminine by early modern standards: indulgence in emotion, passivity, indecisiveness, and mental instability, to name a few.

To say that Hamlet mourns excessively is redundant; by early modern definition, mourning was anything but moderate, one reason for its categorization as feminine. For a man to mourn as Hamlet does from the play’s beginning, however, would have certainly been viewed
with disapproval or even disdain. As Phillippy explains, “the frequent assertion of early modern stoicism that men who grieve immoderately are effeminate lends itself to the chastisement of men’s mourning through shameful comparisons with women.” Laertes emphasizes this point when he weeps upon hearing of his sister’s death: “When these are gone,” he says of his tears, “The woman will be out” (4.7.160-61). Claudius charges Hamlet with what he sees as this sort of feminine indulgence:

But to persever
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness, ’tis unmanly grief,
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschooled… (1.2.92-97)

He describes Hamlet’s immoderation as “obstinate” and “impious,” a sin against “heaven.” To harbor such an “unmanly grief” shows the weakness (“heart unfortified”), inconstancy (“a mind impatient”) and intellectual inferiority (“an understanding simple and unschooled”) of a woman.

Indeed, when Shakespeare shows us in the same play a woman mourning over the death of her father, the portrayal is permeated with echoes of Hamlet’s behavior. Ophelia is “importunate,” and “distraught,” Horatio warns before Gertrude sees her after the murder of Polonius (4.5.2-3). Ophelia’s demeanor seems to be the authentic version of the “antic

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disposition” Hamlet premeditates early in the play, as he envisions himself “with arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,/ Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase” (2.1.173, 175-6). According to Horatio, Ophelia too “speaks things in doubt,/ That carry but half sense” as she “winks and nods and gestures” ambiguously (4.5.6-7, 11). Claudius reacts much differently to Ophelia than does Pandolf to Constance in King John, though both women exhibit the same sorts of behavior. Whereas Pandolf accuses Constance of madness “and not sorrow,” Claudius immediately identifies Ophelia’s condition as “the poison of deep grief” (4.5.73). Ophelia’s madness represents that which Constance seems to fear most. Both cases show the crucial relationship of memory to identity. It is in the context of this scene, in fact, that Ophelia utters one of the play’s many famous lines having to do with the self: “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (4.5.42). Contrary to Claudius’ claim that she has become “divided from herself,” Ophelia seems to know well what she is, even in the midst of madness (4.5.81).

When Ophelia actually enters the scene, “distracted, playing on a lute, and her hair down, singing” (stage direction, ln. 20), the audience may recall Ophelia’s description of a similarly disarrayed Hamlet:

Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyvèd to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he’d been loosèd out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (2.1.79-85)
Hamlet “comes before” Ophelia “as if he’d been loosèd out of hell/ To speak of horrors,” an image that can’t help but to recall the ghost of Hamlet’s father. The audience actually sees Hamlet enter in this state just before his muddled conversation with Polonius. Here Hamlet speaks in ambiguities and double entendres, eliciting from Polonius suspicion and confusion: “Though this be madness, yet there is a method in’t” (2.2.203). Like Ophelia’s words that “carry but half sense,” Hamlet’s seemingly mad language is full of meaning. As Polonius remarks, “How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of” (2.2.206-209). Polonius’ birth metaphor emphasizes Hamlet’s gendered position. His replies are “pregnant” with a “happiness” to which “reason and sanity”—masculinity, in other words—could never give birth. Madness in this play is, among other things, a form of mourning, and as such it allows the mourner unusual license in both speech and action.

Hamlet uses words as weapons, like the women of Richard III, but his response to grief differs from theirs in significant ways. First, he does not openly lament so much as he sulks. When the audience sees glimpses of Hamlet’s internal struggle, it is, of course, through soliloquy rather than through passionate, public lamentations such as those in Richard III. Second, he goes to great lengths to keep his reason for revenge a secret. Though Anne, Margaret, the Duchess, and Elizabeth identify Richard as the object of their vengeance and publicly articulate his offenses against them, Hamlet makes a point of privacy—he compels Horatio and Marcellus to “never make known” that they saw the ghost, for example, and contrives to “catch the conscience of the King” through a play rather than direct confrontation (1.5.148; 2.2.582). And although the women of Richard III use ritual as a means to empowerment, to Hamlet, all methods of mourning and memorialization are “but the trappings and the suits of woe,” faulty
measures of “that within which passeth show” (1.2.85-86). Despite his engagement with these rituals, Hamlet finds them unsatisfactory:

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief
That can denote me truly. (1.2.77-83)

Although Hamlet claims to have “that within which passeth show,” this catalog of ritual mourning behavior indicates that he does everything he can to show it anyway: he wears customary “solemn black,” sighs and weeps copiously, and expresses his dejection through his physical demeanor. As we have seen, he goes so far as to put on an “antic disposition.” Hamlet embraces “the trappings and the suits of woe” even as he laments their relational poverty; they can only amount to poor representations of a grief too rich to convey.

It is worth asking why Hamlet continues to participate, and participate so fully, in a system of signifiers he finds this insufficient. While for Hamlet at least part of the inadequacy of mourning lies in its status as a sign—as Katharine Maus observes, to Hamlet “even reliable indicators or symptoms of his distress become suspect simply because they are defined as indicators and symptoms,” and thus could be false—he also struggles to reconcile that which “seems” with that which “is” on another level.71 In this way, that Hamlet registers loss and lamentation differently than Richard III could be a result of generic difference. Though

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characters in both plays seek retribution, the history play has a different set of concerns and goals than does the revenge tragedy, which is, as Michael Neill argues, “less about the ethics of vendetta” and more “about the murderous legacies of the past and the terrible power of memory.”

Memory, embodied in the ghost of his father, haunts Hamlet throughout the play. Indeed, his father’s ghost charges Hamlet to do precisely that with which he is already consumed: “Remember me” (1.5.91). Though Stephen Greenblatt attributes Hamlet’s preoccupation with his father’s memory to this “solemn command,” the play suggests that Hamlet is obsessed with “remembering” long before he sees the ghost. Thus his incredulous response: “Remember thee?/ Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat/ In this distracted globe. Remember thee?” (1.5.95-97). Like Macduff, Hamlet “cannot but remember,” and his memory moves well beyond mere recollection, imagination, or even ritualistic memorialization. Memory here is that which “is”—and for Hamlet, as for Constance, it has to do with the self.

Hamlet is concerned with memory—the memory of his father, his mother’s memory of her past, the collective memory of the old King Hamlet. His first indictment of his mother is, in fact, her forgetfulness:

Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month—
Let me not think on’t; frailty thy name is woman—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body,

Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer!  (1.2.143-151)

Hamlet indicates that Gertrude was grieved at his father’s death—“she followed my poor father’s body,/Like Niobe, all tears”—but that her mourning was cut short, having ended within “a little month.” The allusion to Niobe is noteworthy. According to the editors of this text, Niobe was so overwhelmed with grief upon the loss of her fourteen children, who had been killed by Apollo and Artemis as a punishment, that she “continued to weep bitterly even after she was turned to stone.” The image of Niobe as a figure of stone that is “all tears” is a monument of sorts, the materialization of memory in the form of a tangible marker, much like a headstone or statue. Hamlet seems to immediately realize that his comparison of Gertrude with Niobe makes all the more obvious his mother’s shortcomings, prompting the following disruption in thought—“why she, even she—/O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourned longer!”

Hamlet’s father has no female monument. Gertrude’s transgression is primarily her lack of memory, a point that Hamlet makes more emphatically in the closet scene when he urges his mother to compare “the counterfeit presentment of two brothers”: “this was your husband. Look you now what follows./Here is your husband… what judgement/Would step from this to this?” (3.4.53; 62-3; 69-70). Hamlet compels Gertrude to recognize her error by remembering.

Memory, in this play as in the changing burial and funeral customs of early modern England, dislocates and replaces purgatory. Despite his references to a purgatorial “prison-house” where he must “fast in fires” until his sins “are burnt and purged away,” Old Hamlet does not plead for intercessory prayer (1.5.11-13). Instead, he demands remembrance, which he

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expects will lead to action. Even before he encounters his father’s ghost, Hamlet mourns because he needs to remember. His memories are compulsory, as in the following excerpt:

So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly! Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? (1.2.139-144)

“Must I remember?” he asks, and the answer is always yes. This is, according to Neill, the dilemma of typical revenge tragedy protagonists:

Alternately disabled by their inability to forget, and driven by their violent compulsion to remember, revenge heroes must wrestle to redeem their dead from the shame of being forgotten, even as they struggle to lay these perturbed spirits to rest, and thereby free themselves from the insistent presence of the past.75

A desire to “redeem” his father “from the shame of being forgotten” is what drives Hamlet toward revenge. Especially in light of the power of female mourning evident in Richard III, Shakespeare leads the audience to wonder if the “violent compulsion to remember” haunting Hamlet until his own death is inevitable, or if the presence of female memorialization might have impacted this play’s resolution as well. Hamlet serves the same function as the women of Richard III in this way—he must remember, and through memory, must come to terms with his identity in terms of loss, as well as achieve some sort of justice and sense of peace with the past. Whether he is accurate or whether he, like Margaret, has heightened the memory in order to hasten the vengeance is unclear. What is clear in Hamlet, as well as Richard III, is the

75 Neill, Issues of Death, 246.
importance of feminized mourning and memory to both the living and the dead, even in a world without purgatory.
Representations of women as agents of redemption reinforced and complicated the emerging emphasis on female piety in Reformation England. Because of the unique relationship of women to ritual, representations of women using ritualistic practice as a means of redemption produce a vision of female spirituality that is, to turn once more to Evelyn Tribble’s terms, poised between “magic” and “memorialism.” Certain redemptive rituals—particularly those in which blessing or confession occur—involve kneeling, a posture that was at the center of the Jacobean debate on practices in worship. Kneeling in worship was controversial from a theological and ecclesiastical perspective, and it also posed political problems. As Lori Anne Ferrell points out, the act itself communicated both “obeisance to God” and “obeisance to the monarch,” raising questions about the distinction between these two types of service and calling attention to the potential disparity between outward expression and inward feeling.

Beginning with an overview of kneeling as it relates to the rituals of auricular confession, which is linked specifically to participation in communion, and parental blessing, this chapter will show the religious relevance and redemptive potential of submissive posturing in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. *King Lear* resonates with the debate on kneeling in worship as it both wrestles with issues of obedience and reflects a widespread uneasiness about the compatibility of

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3 Lori Anne Ferrell, “Kneeling and the Body Politic,” 73.
one’s outward behavior with one’s inner beliefs. In some ways, *King Lear* pits old Catholic attitudes towards ritual against Protestant revisionism in its conflict between father and daughter. Resolution is possible in this play only through the transformation of Lear’s blessing into his confession. As he kneels before his daughter, Lear aligns Cordelia with the priestly confessor—she stands between Lear and the divine—a refiguring that emphasizes the potential of female redemptive ritual.

The disjunction between appearance and reality—a phenomenon Shakespeare as dramatist and actor would have experienced through what Victor Turner calls the “doubleness” of performance—is a major theme throughout Shakespeare’s body of work. Shakespeare’s return to this theme implies not only his own investment in the topic, but its relevance to his society as well. The incessant discussion of and obsessive anxiety about the relationship of appearance to reality seems especially profound with regard to women, whose outward behaviors provided an unreliable index of their inner thoughts—thus writers like Edmund Tilney insist that a woman “must not onely be good, but likewise must apeere so.”

The suspicion that external signs might be inadequate measures of internal integrity also permeates contemporary writings about two influential institutions: the theatre and the church. In the conclusion of his well-known antitheatrical tract *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), Stephen Gosson claims that plays are “the inventions of the devil” and that players are merely “makers of vice” because they enable a lifestyle of “wantonness” and deceit. Gosson, in fact,

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4 See Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). As Maus notes, this “apparently universal suspicion of ‘appearances’” results in “chronic doubts about the adequacy of what can be seen” and informs both dramatic and nondramatic early modern literature (15).


equates acting with lying:

A lye is… an acte executed where it ought not. This acte is discerned by outward signes, every man must show him selfe outwardly to be such as in deed he is. Outward signes consist eyther in words or gestures, to declare our selves by wordes or by gestures to be otherwise then we are, is an act executed where it should not, therefore a lye.8

Gosson condemns the work of the theatre because it transforms reality by way of “outward signes… eyther in words or gestures” to create a visual story—to Gosson, a “lye”—in which the players take on the appearance and characteristics of others, rather than showing themselves “outwardly to be such as in deed” they really are. Katharine Maus notes that in many contemporary sources, the dialectic of religious debaters is often characterized by these terms: “Protestants typically describe themselves as cultivating internal truths while accusing Catholics of attending only to outward ‘shows.’”9 Reformers viewed with suspicion most “outward signes” or “gestures” as potential acts of idolatry.

The dilemma of seeming versus being was at the core of many religious debates throughout the period. One such debate focused on the practice of kneeling at Mass. Like many other pre-Reformation liturgical rituals, kneeling remained a part of Protestant worship. Reformers reframed it, however, as an expression of thanksgiving rather than a necessary and efficacious ritual, a shift in signification similar to the one the practice of churching experienced.10 Eventually, this practice came under the scrutiny of puritans and other dissenters, for whom the act of kneeling to receive communion was a matter of idolatry, superstition, and disregard of Christ’s example. To them, kneeling indicated the belief in transubstantiation or the worship of Eucharistic symbols rather than the deity they were supposed to represent. The

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8 Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, E5r.
10 Lori Anne Ferrell, “Kneeling and the Body Politic,” 75.
puritan William Bradshaw, for instance, stresses the idolatry of the gesture in *A Proposition Concerning Kneeling* (1605):

> And then it must needs follow, that if we abjure these herisyes of Papists, & Lutherans, we must also abhorre idolatrous, & superstitious kneeling, their daughter and Nurse, which was never heard of before Transubstantiation was hatched in the sinogogue of Antichrist.  

Bradshaw contends that kneeling is “idolatrous” and “superstitious,” and goes so far as to insist that believers must “abhorre” the act. He then posits what seems an impossible metaphor in which kneeling is gendered female and figured as fulfilling two functions: it serves simultaneously as both “daughter” and “Nurse” to the “herisyes of Papists, & Lutherans.” The “herisyes” are transubstantiation and consubstantiation—both doctrines that claim the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Bradshaw’s confusing description of kneeling as both offspring (“daughter”) and deliverer or caretaker (“Nurse”) is further complicated by the image of the birth of such “herisyes,” which were, he claims, “hatched in the synagogue of Antichrist.” The birthing metaphor is flawed—what is “hatched” are the “herisyes,” making them the offspring, though he has already figured kneeling as their “daughter” as well as their “Nurse.”

Bradshaw’s logic, however faulty, leads to the conclusion that Catholic doctrine begets kneeling, and consequently, kneeling fosters the paternal “herisye” of which it was born. The care of such a “Nurse” enables further fallacies to be “hatched.”

Despite its inconsistency, the filial metaphor is irresistible to Bradshaw perhaps because of the filial nature of religion in general, and Catholicism specifically. The legitimacy of the offspring—the practices of religion and their practitioners—depends on the authenticity and

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authority of their father. In the case of Catholicism, according to reformers, usurpers (priests, saints, ceremonies) have presumed the position of the rightful father (God alone), producing the practices that will, in turn, keep them alive. Bradshaw’s muddled metaphor serves also to emphasize those aspects of kneeling that seem to make it so dangerous: it is feminine, and it is a monstrosity. To be both “daughter” and “Nurse” is, then, a sign of illegitimacy or deformity. As we shall see, that Cordelia resists Lear’s plan to “set [his] rest/ On her kind nursery”—to make her both “daughter” and “Nurse”—is evidence of her integrity (1.1.132).12

Insisting on the literal or figurative presence of God in the Host was offensive to the Protestant notion that God could not be adequately represented by humans. Communion had presented to Catholics, as Eamon Duffy puts it, “the problem of seeing and not seeing”—the Eucharist seemed outwardly to be one thing (bread), but was actually believed to be another (flesh).13 To reformers, for whom the sacrament was a memorialization rather than a miracle, “the problem of seeing and not seeing” became less about the communion and more about the communicant, whose physical and spiritual posture took on new significance.14 In Actes and monuments (1563), John Foxe claims that

Christ ordained the Supper to be a taking matter, an eatyng matter, a distributing and a remembbring matter. Contrary our masse men make it a matter not of taking, but of gazing, peping, pixing, boxing, carying, recariyng, worshipping, stoopig, kneling, knockig, with stoup down before, hold up hyer, I thank god I see my maker today, &c.

12 In contrast, Keith Wrightson claims that children were “rarely expected to contribute to the maintenance of their parents in their old age,” English Society, 114.
Christ ordained it a table matter. We turne it to an altar matter: he for a memory: we for a sacrifice...\(^{15}\)

Foxe calls into question a series of physical postures—“gazing, peping, pixing, boxing, carying, recariyng, worshipping, stoopig, kneling, knockig, with stoup down before, hold up hyer”—and argues that such gestures have displaced Christ’s original intention for communion. The postures that Foxe mentions, including “kneling,” are a result of “the problem of seeing and not seeing” the Host. That communicants engage in such postures in order to “see” their “maker” is evidence enough of their inappropriateness. Further, the scene Foxe describes is a disruptive one; most of the gestures that comprise his derogatory list seem to create an atmosphere that is anything but reverent. For Foxe, the focus of communion ought to be internal rather than external, both individually—it is “a taking matter, an eatyng matter”—and communally—it is “a distributing and a remembering matter.” Outward physical gestures are merely an impediment to the real work of communion, which is, Foxe claims, “a table matter” rather than “an altar matter.”

Indeed, reformers preferred to call communion the “Lord’s Supper,” rhetorically establishing the event as commemorative and imitative, modeled after the Last Supper of Christ.\(^{16}\) The unsuitability of kneeling at a table, along with the reminder that Christ was not kneeling at the Last Supper, were frequently used arguments against the posture. The Scottish minister and historian David Calderwood, for instance, writes in *A defence of our arguments against kneeling in the act of receiving the sacramental elements of bread and wine* (1620): “We reason likewise... against any other gesture which is not a Table-gesture, howbeit not with the

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\(^{16}\) See Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage*, 99.
same force, as against kneeling.” For Calderwood, that kneeling was not a “Table-gesture” was only one of its flaws. This physical posture was indicative of a spiritual posture that was inappropriately private and self-centered:

We say that in the act of receiving the Sacramentall elements; we should meditate, and consider the analogie of the signe, and the things signified; attend with our minds, exercise our senses, because of the externall Symbols, and rituall actions…and that it is not a fit time of solemne prayer, and thanksgiving, and consequently that in the act of receiving wee should not kneele. Calderwood emphasizes the importance inner thought—“we should meditate,” “attend with our minds,” and “exercise our senses”—but specifies that such thoughts should be intent upon “the signe” of the Host and “the things signified” thereby rather than individual “solemne prayer” or “thanksgiving.” Interestingly, for Calderwood, the problem with kneeling has nothing to do with an aversion to “externall Symbols, and rituall actions,” for he seems to affirm those. Rather, communicants “should not kneele” because it signifies to him something other than “the analogie of the sign,” the Eucharist.

Kneeling during the Mass was linked to communion, but also associated with confession, a prerequisite to participating in the sacrament. The Eucharist was not only a means of individual communion with Christ but also the incorporation of Christians into the body of Christ. An essential precondition of communicating was, therefore, confession and repentance of transgressions against God as well as against one another. “The Ordre for the

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18 David Calderwood, *A defence of our arguments against kneeling*, 64.  
Administracion of the Lordes Supper, or Holy Communion” in the Book of Common Prayer makes explicit this connection in its instructions to the priest:

> And if any of those be an open and notorious evil liver, so that ye congregacion by him is offended, or have done any wrong to hys neighbours by word or dede: ye Curate having knowledge thereof, shal cal hym, and advertise hym, in any wise not to presume to the Lordes table, until he have openly declared him self to have truly repented, and amended his former naughty lyfe… Then shal the Priest rehearse distinctly al the .x. Commaundementes, and the people knelyng, shal after every Commaundemete aske Goddes mercye for theyr transgression of the same.²⁰

Before approaching “the Lordes table,” believers were exhorted “to have truly repented” of any “word or dede” that may have “offended” their “neighbours” in Christ. The priest would lead the parishioners in asking “Goddes mercye for theyr transgression” of his holy commands only after they have reconciled with one another. Confession is thus, like the Lord’s Supper, a communal act. Believers should seek redemption from their “neighbours” as well as from God himself.

A similar recitation of the Ten Commandments and kneeling posture would have taken place during the individual auricular confession each worshipper was supposed to have undergone. Legislation passed in 1215 required Christians to go to confession annually, and in most places, according to Duffy, parishioners did so during Holy Week in preparation for receiving communion on Easter.²¹ Although the confessional box came into use around the second half of the sixteenth century, providing penitents a sense of privacy, the previous format

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for confession would likely have lingered over the sacrament’s new practice. Thomas N. Tentler notes that most illustrations of confession preceding the advent of the confessional box show the penitent kneeling before a seated priest.\textsuperscript{22} The confessing individual was not only in full view of the priest, but also was visible to the “queues of waiting fellow-parishioners looming close behind, the mutter of their rosaries or their chatter plainly audible,” as Duffy explains.\textsuperscript{23} Privacy was not a concern, which makes sense if the nature of confession is communal as well as personal.

The communal aspect of confession is evident in some visual remnants that survived the iconoclasm of the Reformation. For example, Ann Eljenholm Nichols sees what she terms the “rules of etiquette” for confession in the thirty-three baptismal fonts of Norfolk and Suffolk.\textsuperscript{24} The bowl of each font consists of eight panels, seven devoted to the sacraments and one usually portraying either Christ’s crucifixion or his baptism. In the font reliefs depicting confession and absolution, nearly all of the penitents are kneeling before the confessor. Some of these also show other penitents waiting for their turn.\textsuperscript{25} In the most well-known English manual of religious instruction of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, \textit{Instructions for Parish Priests}, John Mirk emphasizes the physical posture of the penitent in his guidelines for confession: “And fyrst, when any mon I-schryve wole be,/Teche hym to knele downe on hys kne.”\textsuperscript{26} Later, as Mirk advises priests about how to receive confession from a woman, he again emphasizes kneeling:

\begin{quote}
But when a woman cometh to þe,

Loke hyre face þat þou ne se,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Thomas N. Tentler, \textit{Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation}, 82.
\textsuperscript{23} Eamon Duffy, \textit{The Stripping of the Altars}, 60.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 149.
But teche hyre to knele downe þe by,

And sum-what þy face from hyre þou wry.²⁷

Although it averts the temptation of lust, the instruction to the priest to “sum-what [his] face from hyre… wry” has other implications as well. This slight alteration in the priest’s position grants the female penitent a measure of privacy denied to men, and also insinuates a sense of shame not so explicitly present in the male confession.

Although there was evidently a measure of consensus about the penitent’s obligation to kneel, contemporary works indicate disagreement about precisely what the priest was to do. That there were incongruities concerning whether or not the priest should touch the penitent’s head as he pronounced absolution, for example, anticipates the reformers’ insistence that forgiveness came from God alone.²⁸ Duffy points out the didactic responsibility of the priest, who “was instructed to work through the Ten Commandments, the seven sins, the corporal works of mercy,” and “the five bodily senses” in order to guide the parishioner toward a more complete confession; however, as Tentler asserts, a “good confession” depended more on the penitent than on the priest.²⁹

Indeed, from the perspective of reformers, the priesthood was guilty of usurping God’s divine position in its practice of confession. In his Discourse Concerning Auricular Confession As It Is Prescribed By The Council of Trent and Practise (1684), for instance, John Goodman claims that the form of confession observed in the Church of England
doeth not please the Romanists neither… because this doth not conciliate so great a

Veneration to the Priest-hood, as when all men are brought to kneel to them for

²⁷ Ibid., 113.
²⁸ Thomas N. Tentler, Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation, 86.
Salvation: Neither doth this way make them to pry into the secret thoughts of Men as Auricular Confession doth, wherein the Priest is not only made a Judge of mens estate, but a Spy upon their behavior...  

The problem with kneeling in confession, according to Goodman, is the “Veneration to the Priest-hood” it signifies. Goodman blurs the line between religious and secular power, accusing the priest of presuming to be a “Judge” who holds the power to grant “Salvation” to those who “are brought to kneel” before him. Further, the priest is a “Spy” who pries into people’s private behavior. Goodman’s use of the word “Spy,” a term normally devoid of religious connotations, makes the priest not only morally suspect, but also politically dangerous.

Goodman concludes that “the natural tendency of all this” is to “make People believe that their Salvation or Damnation is in the Power of the Priest, that he is a little God Almighty...”  

The idea of a believer kneeling to someone who is supposed to represent God offends Protestant sensibilities and, according to Goodman’s analogy, also jeopardizes political stability. As in any relationship in which one party holds power over the other, abuse of that power is always a possibility. This is certainly true of the relationships between monarch and subject, master and servant, parent and child—all of which are relationships Shakespeare brings to the forefront of King Lear. The association of the priest with the parishioner in a confessional context, then, poses two threats of which early modern writers like Goodman and Shakespeare were keenly aware: tyranny and rebellion.

The political and religious risk of making “a little God Almighty” of the one to whom an individual kneels is perhaps most evident in the ritual of parental blessing. Though certainly less

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31 John Goodman, A Discourse Concerning Auricular Confession, 40.
overtly religious in context than communion or confession, parental blessing renders the parent, much like the priest, “a Judge of mens estate.” Like the religious sacraments involving kneeling, parental blessing situates one participant, both rhetorically and physically, as the divine intermediary while the other party kneels in submission. Bruce Young argues that the ritual served to remind both parent and child of their duties to one another rather than only to show the child’s submission, noting that the act of kneeling “effectively stationed the parent between the child and the heavens,” symbolizing “a kind of quasi-priestly intermediary” to emphasize the positive nature of the blessing ritual and the desire of the parent to show grace rather than dominance. The ritual is, nevertheless, representative of the hierarchical structure of early modern culture. In the way that kneeling had become associated with priestly intrusion into “the secret thoughts of Men” rather than with more positive things, like priestly mediation of grace, parental blessing represents a paradigm for the filial relationship that makes it vulnerable to abuse.

The parent/child relationship mirrored the master/servant paradigm, but more importantly, it reinforced the monarch/subject model. According to Robert Filmer’s Patriarcha, for example, the “natural duties of a father” and “those of a king” are “all one.” As the king was figured as the father of his realm, so the father was figured as the king of his dominion. Because of the direct correlation between fathers and kings, the disobedience of a child was a potentially threatening force to the stability of the patriarchy. The Tudor homily on disobedience highlights this correlation, warning that rebels “do not only dishonor their prince, the parent of

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their country, but also do dishonor and shame their natural parents.”34 An obedient child was “most likely to become a loyal subject” as opposed to a traitor, as Lacy Baldwin Smith points out, and the major goal of parents and educators was “to make treason impossible by making it unthinkable.”35 In drafting the First Succession Act of 1534 during the reign of Henry VIII, the Council Learned considered adding a clause concerning the rebellion of the king’s “heir,” but deemed it unnecessary “because ‘a rebellion is already treason.’”36 Children were to obey fathers as subjects were to obey kings and as all people were to obey God.

The ritual of parental blessing was, in some ways, a theatrical event, especially when it was public rather than private. In his *New Catechism* (1559), Thomas Becon thus instructs children not merely to obey their parents, but to give them “that reverence and honour outwardly… as to bow the knee unto them, to ask them blessing… and with all outward gestures to show a reverent honour and honourable reverence toward them, as persons representing the majesty of God.”37 As a child knelt before a parent, he or she was performing a carefully scripted role. By kneeling, the child asked for the blessing in a posture that indicated total submission. By speaking the blessing, the parent granted not only verbal approval but, presumably, material or physical reward. The child could undermine the parent’s ability to maintain power through the granting of blessing by simply refusing to kneel. In this way, neither the ritualistic act of blessing nor the parent’s ability to wield power was possible without the

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child’s consent. Much like confession, which could be effective only through the complete participation of the one confessing, blessing was contingent on the one being blessed.

The parental blessing shares in common with confession the ambiguous space between superstition and mere show—both fit Tribble’s description of rituals that are suspended between “magic” and “memorialism.”38 Similarly, Kenneth Gross describes the blessing as “a speech act” that seems to lie “at the threshold between magic and prayer.”39 The biblical story of the brothers Jacob and Esau exemplifies the importance of parental blessing not only with regard to familial bonds, but in terms of its actual effect on the future. As the firstborn son, Esau was the rightful heir to Isaac’s blessing. Upon learning that his twin brother Jacob (younger by moments) had stolen his birthright, Esau yet begged for his father’s blessing: “Hast thou but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, my father: and Esau lifted up his voyce and wept.”40 Isaac responded by performing a blessing over Esau, though it was devoid of its original meaning, telling him that he would live by his sword and “be [his] brother’s servant” (Genesis 27:40). Jacob’s blessing, on the other hand, made him the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The ritual of parental blessing creates a tension between earthly father and divine father, a tension that reflects the resistance of reformers to former Catholic practices. The lengths to which Jacob went to secure his brother’s blessing and the desperate reaction of Esau upon having lost it demonstrate that the essence of a parent’s blessing—a speech act whose verbal articulation creates or enforces good for the receiver—was much more than the words used to convey it. In this way, the parent to whom the child kneels not only represents “the majesty of God,” as Becon

suggests, but actually becomes what Goodman calls “a little God Almighty.” The parent totters between being God’s representative and being his replacement. Like a midwife, the parent can thus come dangerously close to counterfeiting the divine.

What begins in *King Lear* as a sort of ritual parental blessing becomes over the course of the play more like a ritual confession. Kneeling, as both a physical and rhetorical posture, plays a crucial role in the transformation of Lear’s blessing to his confession, especially as it confirms and complicates “the problem of seeing” inherent in such external gestures. The workings of blessing and confession in Shakespeare’s play rely on Cordelia’s relationship to ritual, moreover, emphasizing in the end the power of female redemption. Cordelia’s view of Lear’s authority resembles the Protestant resistance toward the priesthood; she will give her father the veneration he is due, but she will not, as Goodman says, make him “a little God Almighty.” Indeed, Cordelia’s refusal to participate in a ritualistic exchange she finds insufficient is what incites the major conflict of *King Lear*, and her redeeming sacrifice is what resolves it.

The play opens with a brief private conversation alluding to the upcoming public events, but something happens that immediately changes the tone and juxtaposes these two spheres—private and public—in a way that cannot help but call attention to their incompatibility. King Lear enters. He enters not alone, but with his three daughters and his two sons-in-law, among other attendants. Lear proclaims his intention to “publish/ [His] daughters’ several dowers” in order to prevent “future strife”; his choice of the word “publish” makes clear that Lear does not see this as a private matter.41 Rather, the king enters with those he brings before the public—his public—onto the stage where what Victor Turner calls a “social drama” will be enacted.42

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41 William Shakespeare, “King Lear” (Conflated Text), *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 1.1.43-44. All other references to Shakespeare’s works will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

By asking his daughters for public adoration in exchange for parental generosity, Lear maintains power as he utilizes the functional structure of a custom that is both culturally acceptable and accessible: parental blessing. He is not only upholding “a central ideological principle of middle- and upper-class families in the early modern period,” but also relying on what Turner calls the “prophylactic” effect of ritual by “anticipating and averting” conflict.43 Expecting each daughter to respond “with all outward gestures to show a reverent honour and honourable reverence toward” him, as Thomas Becon advises children to do, Lear poses the question: “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (1.1.49). He claims that his intent is to “extend” the “largest bounty” of his kingdom “where nature doth with merit challenge”; as in the traditional blessing of children by their parents, Lear will bless in exchange for outward submission and honor.

Lear’s initiation of the ritual in a public setting is not unusual—parental blessings were themselves theatrical in nature, and after all, he is the king. Stanley Cavell’s assertion that the ritual with which the play begins is simply Lear’s way of “bribing love out of his children” disregards the early modern context in which it would have been natural for Lear to expect the shows of obedience and honor from his daughters.44 Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt attributes Lear’s love test to an inability to distinguish “between authority and love” that fails because the play suggests that Lear “cannot have both the public deference and the inward love of his children.”45 Greenblatt’s distinction, like Cavell’s, is a fundamentally modern one since contemporary sources point toward public deference in the child-parent relationship as nonnegotiable from either party’s perspective.

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43 Ibid., 110.
44 Ibid., 61.
Lear prefers the security of a ritual in which he holds the position of power to the unpredictability of less structured forms of exchange. Rather than merely “trading power for love,” as Cavell contends, Lear preserves his power by capitalizing on the public image of love.\footnote{Stanley Cavell, \textit{Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68.} Although Cavell claims that Lear “wants something” from his daughters that “he does not have to return \textit{in kind},” it makes more sense to read Lear’s action as an attempt to get something that he can return \textit{in kind}.\footnote{Stanley Cavell, \textit{Disowning Knowledge}, 62.} By orchestrating a ritualistic and public exchange of commodities—land, money, a daughter, and love—Lear trades the subversive potential that a less prescribed exchange might present for the comfort of what Greenblatt calls an “evacuated ritual.”\footnote{Stephen Greenblatt, \textit{Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England} (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 112.}

Lear reconciles “the problem of seeing and not seeing”—the familiar disparity between seeming and being—through the performance of an empty ritual, despite the difficulty of measuring internal belief by external action. What makes the ritual an empty one is Lear’s demand for an articulation of love even as he relinquishes the position by which such honor is due.\footnote{Stephen Greenblatt, \textit{Shakespearean Negotiations}, 127.} In dividing his kingdom and divesting himself of his power, Lear still demands to “retaine/ The name, and all th’ addition to a King,” thus performing a role—maintaining a “sacred sign” which has been “emptied” of its meaning—while abandoning the responsibilities accompanying such a role.\footnote{Ibid., 112.} Lear’s desire for the appearance of kingship outweighs his sense of obligation to the reality of kingship.

This exchange of essence for appearance is problematic on several levels. As a parent, and moreover as a king, Lear is supposed to represent “the majesty of God,” according to writers like Thomas Becon. Lear strives to hold on to the image yet give up the responsibility associated
with majesty in the domestic realm (as a father) and majesty in the political realm (as a king), and consequently usurps majesty in the spiritual realm—the majesty of God. In this way, Lear’s act can be labeled as not merely an irresponsible violation of his bond, but a blasphemous transgression. Lear “empties out” the divine ordination that gives him the right to his title, which might account for the conspicuous absence of God throughout the play.

Further, Lear’s division of a kingdom would have confirmed the worst fears of a contemporary audience, who shared in a cultural anxiety about their dependence on the monarchy for political stability. The monarch does not have the privilege of deciding to retire, for as Montaigne points out, “a king has nothing properly his own; he owes himself to others.” Additionally, the aspect of family structure in early modern England that had the most impact on the family as a whole, but specifically on relationships between parents and children as well as siblings, was primogeniture—a system Lear’s decision undermines. Because he is the monarch and because he distributes his property among his heirs while he is still alive, Lear’s decision is a threat to the stability of the entire kingdom.

After hearing “that glib and oily art” of flattery both of her sisters can speak so well, Cordelia claims that she can say “nothing” that will “draw a third more opulent” than theirs, and she is right (1.1.86-7, 224). Lear has “divided in three” his kingdom before the scene begins, and has already designated two of those parts to Cordelia’s sisters before she is asked to speak. Only one third remains, the opulence of which is not contingent on what she says, so in that sense her

53 In his *De Republica Anglorum: The maner of Governement or policie of the Realme of England*, 1583, ed. Mary Dewar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Sir Thomas Smith does make an exception to primogeniture: “But the common lawe taketh place if hee that dieth hath no sonnes but daughters, the lande is equally divided among them, which partition is made by agreement or by lotte” (135). Were Lear merely a father of three daughters, and not the king, his decision to divide his property would have been acceptable.
answer to Lear’s first question is simply logical. Lear, however, is concerned with the appearance of this exchange above the reality of it. Cordelia’s decision to “love, and be silent” rather than obey her father’s request is obviously a shock to Lear, whose initial response is one of disbelief: “Nothing?” (1.1.87). His subsequent attempts to allow Cordelia another chance—“Nothing will come of nothing, speak again,” he says, and “mend your speech a little, Lest it may mar your fortunes”—also suggest that Lear had every reason to anticipate cooperation from his daughters (1.1.89; 93-4). He, of course, expected the best from Cordelia, who was his “joy,” and whom he claims to have “loved...most” (1.1.81;123 ). Presumably, Cordelia had not been “so untender” until this point, so that her decision to choose silence over performance at this time is significant (1.1.106).

Lear has essentially given up the power and majesty without which he cannot truly give his blessing to Cordelia, which is what renders the ritual hollow in her mind. Cordelia’s refusal to play the role laid out for her manifests not only an inability on her part to “pretend publicly to love,” but also a fear that, in Greenblatt’s words, “performance kills belief.” Although Cordelia might be capable of publicly playing out the part Lear assigns to her—for if she does indeed love him, saying so in public isn’t “pretending”—in doing so, she could nullify the reality of that love, despite the ritual’s intended meaning. According to Turner, the fundamental difference between ritual and theatre lies in the fact that ritual “does not distinguish between audience and performers” as theatre does. The blessing ritual in King Lear is no longer a pure ritual because a distinction has been made between audience and performers, which recalls the

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54 See Stanley Cavell, Disowning Knowledge, 65. Cavell points out that Cordelia could say nothing because “she could not flatter” her father at this point; in other words, “nothing she could have done would have been flattery,” and so her refusal is not obstinance but conscientiousness.
55 Ibid., 109.
56 Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, 112.
idea of performance that “kills belief.” Under these conditions, if Cordelia complies, her profession of love is merely a performance.

Lear’s plan to preserve a name emptied of its meaning involves a role reversal in which the child becomes the caretaker and he becomes the child, free from the burden of adult responsibilities, for he says of Cordelia that he had planned to “set [his] rest/On her kind nursery” (1.1.132). Lear’s desire resonates with William Bradshaw’s flawed birthing metaphor, in which the act of kneeling becomes both “daughter and Nurse.” The fantasy that Cordelia would be both “daughter and Nurse” to Lear is not a representative—or even acceptable—example of parent/child relationships in early modern England, which usually follow a stable political pattern of hierarchy. What registers as a monstrosity to Bradshaw—the “herisye” of empty ritual—represents to King Lear a vision of future happiness. While Cordelia’s refusal to become “Nurse” as well as “daughter” indicates her legitimacy, the pretended compliance of Goneril and Regan ultimately reveals their monstrosity. Lear’s other two daughters claim to be both “daughter” and “Nurse,” and they both fail at being either one. Conversely, Cordelia loves her father “according to [her] bond,” a bond which compels her neither to render him “a little God Almighty” nor to care for him as his “Nurse,” but rather to return her “duties back as are right fit” (1.1.93, 97).

Cordelia can not “heave [her] heart into her mouth” for the sake of an “evacuated ritual” (1.1.63). Rather than surrender to a ritual with no meaning, Cordelia chooses resistance, and

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57 In contrast, Keith Wrightson claims that children were “rarely expected to contribute to the maintenance of their parents in their old age,” English Society, 114.
58 Judy Kronenfeld, King Lear and the Naked Truth: Rethinking the Language of Religion and Resistance (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Kronenfeld observes that “Cordelia’s attitude toward” the “bond”, as well as the “nature of the ‘bond’ itself” are frequently interpreted as symbols “of the transition, in England from traditional to modern, feudal to capitalistic, kinship-based to individualistic society” (95). Whether or not Cordelia’s boldness signals a larger political transition, Shakespeare does not come down fully on her side. If such a transition is imminent, Shakespeare makes it clear that it will come at a high price; in King Lear, despite the argument that redemption is achieved in the end, death is the result for both father and daughter.
even banishment. While Cordelia’s banishment gives her sisters more freedom to “do something…i’the heat” of their father’s rash behavior and haunts Lear later in the play, those observing the incident take it much more lightly than both Kent’s banishment and France’s departure on negative terms. For instance, upon hearing what has happened, Gloucester asks, “Kent banish’d thus? and France in choler parted?,” but makes no mention of the king’s favorite daughter (1.2.23). Similarly, even Regan and Goneril find Cordelia’s banishment less worrisome than “unconstant starts” like “Kent’s banishment” and the “leave-taking between France” and Lear (1.1.301-2). Cordelia’s banishment looks less like a punishment and more like a choice than Kent’s. She does not waver when threatened, and seems to have no desire to remain in a world of “nothing,” a world in which she must choose between truth and blessing:

Lear: But goes thy heart with this?

Cordelia: Ay, good my lord.

Lear: So young, and so untender?

Cordelia: So young, my lord, and true.

Lear: Let it be so! Thy truth, then, be thy dower! (1.1.104-8)

Lear’s impulse is to question the integrity to which Cordelia is so committed—“but goes they heart with this?”—assuming that perhaps like her sisters, Cordelia’s words don’t accurately represent her feelings. In this regard, Lear does show an interest in what is true. When that truth displeases him, however, he is quick to dismiss it—“Thy truth, then, be thy dower!” Unlike the Protestants of early modern England, King Lear privileges external action—ritual—even at the cost of truth. His youngest daughter, on the other hand, does not.

Like Hamlet, who is wary of “actions that a man might play,” Cordelia views with suspicion “such a tongue” that can “speak and purpose not” (1.2.86). To “speak” and to

“purpose” are, for Cordelia, inextricably bound together. Unlike her sisters, whose “large speeches” and “words of love” never produce the “good effects” of which Kent speaks, Cordelia does “what [she] well intends…before [she] speaks” (1.1.185; 225-6). In this way, Cordelia shares much in common with another of Shakespeare’s characters, Coriolanus, who also finds it difficult to negotiate insufficient rituals. Coriolanus says of the common people: “I love them as they weigh,” an echo of Cordelia’s “I love your Majesty/ According to my bond, no more nor less” (2.2.73). He feels that by needing the public display of his loyalty to them, the people had “rather to have [his] hat than [his] heart,” and so he “will practice the insinuating nod and be off to them most counterfeitly” (2.3.100). Just as Cordelia cannot reconcile her true feelings with the compulsion to articulate them in a public exchange, Coriolanus cannot give both “hat” and “heart” to the public. It must be one or the other. Even as he resigns himself—“Custom calls me to’t” (2.3.117)—he still wishes to “o’erleap that custom” of showing his scars to the people, “as if I’d receiv’d them for the hire of their breath only” (2.2.136). By showing his scars—a testimony of his bravery and sense of honor—he risks not only be diminishing that bravery and honor, but also subordinating himself to the people’s authority rather than being acknowledged as their leader.

External signs—scars for Coriolanus, words for Cordelia—are so inadequate that they jeopardize the integrity of the internal virtue they are supposed to signify. When asked to greet the people in accordance with tradition, just as Cordelia is asked to conform to convention, Coriolanus is unable to comply: “What must I say?/ ‘I pray, sir’—Plague upon’t! I cannot bring/ My tongue to such a pace” (2.3.50). Whereas Coriolanus cannot speak what he does not truly feel, Cordelia cannot speak what she does truly feel. She “cannot heave/ [her] heart into [her] mouth” (1.1.97); in contrast, Coriolanus’ “heart’s his mouth” (3.1.256). Coriolanus’ reason for
resistance has to do with his contempt for hypocrisy and his pride. Although both are banished for their silence, Coriolanus defiantly cries, “I banish you!” in retaliation (3.3.123), while Cordelia’s parting gesture is to ask her sisters to “love well” their father, in whose “grace” she wishes to stand again (1.1.271). In contrast to Coriolanus’ reaction, which is aggressive and impulsive, Cordelia’s behavior is calm, rational, and dignified in a way that reveals a sense of controlled power and confidence in her position.

Like the reformers, whose denunciation of practices such as kneeling during confession or communion dislocated the power of the church, Cordelia’s rejection of Lear’s “evacuated ritual” undermines her father’s position in relation to her. Noting that religious drama throughout the Renaissance “abounds with daughters who deliberately violate their father’s commands and thereby attain sainthood,” Debora Shuger links the defiant virgin daughter to a desire for “Christian liberation from the ancient constraints” of things like human paternity, a desire to which she attributes “destabilizing tension between the claims of domestic… and spiritual kinship—of father and Father—to unconditional allegiance.” In these cases, the daughter’s commitment to the invisible, spiritual Father is a threat to the authority of the present, earthly father, and so a threat to the patriarchy in general. This competition between “father and Father” in King Lear mirrors the rejection by reformers of many Catholic practices, putting Cordelia in as politically and culturally precarious a position as the one occupied by early modern Protestants.

Cordelia’s decision not to answer her father also registers as a privileging of the inner self over the outer self, aligning her once again with the iconoclasm of the Reformation. In his

Handbook of the Militant Christian, Erasmus talks about the necessity of this division and the superiority of the inner self:

Blessed are they who hear the word of God internally… Advance from the body to the spirit… from things sensible to things intelligible… if you make a sincere effort to escape from the chains of blindness with which the love of sensible things has bound you, He will come to you, and you, no longer chained to the things of earth, will be enveloped in the silence of God.61

Just as Erasmus privileges “the invisible” over the “sensible,” Cordelia is dedicated to something more transcendent than her father’s dowry, or even his love. Like the reformers who sought to eradicate “things sensible” and embrace “things intelligible,” Cordelia attempts to “escape from the chains of blindness”—blindness which is symbolically attached to both fathers in this play—by relying on “spirit” over “body.” In doing so, the daughter leaves her father essentially powerless.

The father’s power, in this case, relies on the performative nature of the blessing. Lear’s relationship with his daughters as well as details of the play’s subplot—Edmund’s scheme to take his brother’s rightful place, Gloucester’s blind belief in false accusations against his loyal son, Edgar’s desperate need for his father’s blessing—reflects the biblical story of the brothers Jacob and Esau. Like Esau, Edgar falls victim to his younger brother’s conspiracy and still longs for his father’s blessing, as he tells Albany that he “led him, begg’d for him, sav’d him from despair… Not sure, though hoping, of this good success/I ask’d his blessing, and from first to last/ Told him our pilgrimage” (5.3.192-197, emphasis mine). The veneration of the paternal blessing at work in the biblical narrative explains not only Edgar’s yearning to be blessed by

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Gloucester, but also Lear’s shock at Cordelia’s seeming indifference toward being blessed by him. The desperation of Edgar and the indignation of Lear echo the anguish of an unblessed Esau, as he wept: “Bless me, even me also, my father.”

Just as Isaac’s blessing made Jacob, instead of Esau, the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, the blessings of both Gloucester and King Lear have real and potentially powerful repercussions for their children—and the children in all three examples recognize this. Although most biblical scholars resist the view that blessings or curses are inherently “magical,” they do find it significant that many ancient cultures privileged the spoken word as uniquely and irresistibly powerful.62 For example, even though Isaac’s blessing of Jacob was unintentional—he thought he was blessing Esau—it can’t be withdrawn because it is transmitted through and effected by God.63 Cordelia is “unhappy” that she “cannot heave [her] heart into [her] mouth,” knowing that the lack of “a still-soliciting eye” is what costs her Lear’s “grace and favor”—his blessing, the irrevocable blessing which he bestows upon her deceitful sisters and not on her (1.1.91, 224, 229 273).64 Cordelia’s bold and fearless demeanor affirm that she knows exactly what she stands to lose—her father’s “grace”—and is willing to risk it.

Lear’s curse for Goneril in Act 1, scene 4 is a particularly disturbing example of this sort of performative language not only in its content (he prays to Nature to “convey sterility” into her womb and “dry up in her the organs of increase”) but in its intensity as well. His words are more than a mere wish; as it turns out, they are prophetic. What is even more striking than Lear’s curse itself is the fact that he feels compelled to deliver it to cancel out his blessing. He cannot

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62 William J. Urbrock, “Blessings and Curses,” The Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1992 ed. Urbrock explains that “once uttered, the word would practically take on a life of its own and continue in effect whether or not circumstances changed or the original speaker had a change of mind” (755).
64 Bruce Young, “Ritual as an Instrument of Grace,” 174. Young points out that “the failure to bless… is disastrous” because it symbolizes a “denial of the living connection between parent and child” communicated through the blessing ritual.
revoke (or merely regret) his pronouncement of good for Goneril, but must replace it with a
pronouncement of the opposite. Theoretically, one “performative utterance” could be nullified
through another. The fact that a new speech act would be required to void a previous speech act
only affirms the somewhat mystical quality of both. Isaac cannot take back his blessing of Jacob
and give it to Esau. In the same way, Lear cannot revoke his curse on Cordelia without
pronouncing his blessing over her, which he imagines doing in the end.

A restoration of the ritual’s full meaning requires a refiguring of and renewed dedication
to the relationship between the parties involved. The “social drama” ends, according to Turner’s
model, with either “the reconciliation of the contending parties or their agreement to differ,”
brought about by what he calls the “redressive machinery” used to “seal up punctures in the
social fabric.” When Cordelia sees Lear for the first time since her banishment, she, like Edgar
and Esau, expresses a desire for the blessing of her father: “O, look upon me, sir/ And hold your
hands in benediction o’er me.” Her next line suggests that Lear’s impulse is to physically
humble himself before his daughter, as she insists, “No, sir, you must not kneel” (4.7. 57-9). The
blessing has, at this point, already begun transforming into a confession.

Father and daughter have indeed reversed roles, though not in the way Lear had initially
envisioned. King Lear underestimates the love of Cordelia, saying, “If you have poison for me, I
will drink it.” While Lear could be talking about a literal “poison” he is willing to “drink,”
showing his resignation to death, he could also be referring to the verbal or emotional “poison”
he expects from Cordelia, a “poison” he is also willing to “drink.” The latter is more likely, for
he continues:

I know you do not love me; for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

65 Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, 10.
You have some cause, they have not. (4.7.73-76)

The words that follow scan as a completion of Lear’s preceding line, showing that Cordelia responds without delay, simply: “No cause, no cause” (4.7.76). As Barbara Millard observes, Cordelia fulfills the role “of the redemptive Son,” assuming all of “its sacrificial implications.”66

This becomes increasingly clear as the father and daughter are captured and Cordelia says, “For thee, oppresséd king, am I cast down” (5.3.5). This statement bears the weight, of course, of multiple meanings: she is downcast or discouraged, and she is “cast down” from her position of royal authority. But she is also “cast down” voluntarily and sacrificially. Cordelia is “cast down,” metaphorically kneeling before her father and “oppresséd king.”

At the center of King Lear’s vision for his future with Cordelia in prison is a scene of reconciliation based on the fulfillment of—and adaptation of—ritualistic blessing: “When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneele down / And ask of thee forgiveness” (5.3.10). When the father imagines his daughter dutifully kneeling to ask for his blessing, he sees himself not bestowing it on her as he would have at the play’s beginning: from his throne, in front of a large audience, and accompanied by a large dowry. He plans to assume the posture of submission—“I’ll kneele down”—and engage in a sort of ritual confession in which he will seek not Cordelia’s profession of love, but her “forgiveness.” Through this gesture, Lear’s act of blessing transforms into an act of confessing, making Cordelia the intermediary between himself and God. The public theatricality of the blessing ritual, intended to shame his daughters into response, will become for Lear a private confession. The privacy of this imagined moment is significant; Lear’s confession will not happen like those portrayed on the baptismal fonts in which lines of waiting parishioners observe the penitent’s piety. The transformation from blessing to confession is one from

authority to submission, from judgment to grace, from public ceremony to private commemoration—echoing the reformation Protestants claimed to desire for the church.

Lear’s vision of his redemptive confession recalls the mock confession he performs for Regan in 2.4. When Regan tells her father he ought to apologize to Goneril, he responds:

Ask her forgiveness?

Do you but mark how this becomes the house:

“Dear daughter, I confess that I am old; (kneeling)
Age is unnecessary. On my knees I beg
That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.” (2.4.145-9)

The disparity between Lear’s mock confession and his real one serves to highlight the disparity between the worthiness of his other daughters and Cordelia. To have seen Lear kneel earlier in the play, with sarcasm and fury, inscribes the image of genuine kneeling with a powerful sense of transformation.

Despite Lear’s best intentions, his vision of reconciliation in prison instead takes the form of remorse upon Cordelia’s death. When he enters “with Cordelia dead in his arms,” Kent tries to comfort him: “O my good master!” (5.3.267). The stage direction preceding this line states that Kent is “kneeling,” suggesting, as some editors note, that he does so out of submission because Lear is likely kneeling as well.⁶⁷ That Lear kneels with Cordelia’s corpse is important in terms of emerging cultural views of female piety. Though he has envisioned a scene of confession in which Cordelia becomes the representative of God, Shakespeare’s play allows Lear to actualize such a scene only upon her death. Like Phillip Stubbes, who in A christal glasse for Christian Women says that his wife Katharine “now being dead, is a perfect patterne of true

⁶⁷ See, for example, “King Lear” in The Norton Shakespeare, whose editors include the following note in all three versions of the text: “Lear probably kneels over Cordelia’s body during most of the scene, and Kent kneels here partly in submission, partly to catch Lear’s attention” (n.6, 2470; n.5, 2471; n.5, 2551).
Christianitie,” Lear can fully acknowledge Cordelia’s spiritual capacity only when she is dead. Cordelia’s silence, previously a sign of her rebellion—and what leads Lear to a series of decisions that will effect his downfall—becomes when she dies evidence of her piety, by Lear’s own description: “Her voice was ever soft,/Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman” (5.3.271-2). Cordelia’s death is what moves Lear to full repentance and, consequently, redemption. King Lear dies, then, in a posture not fit for fathers or kings, but appropriate to the penitent—one immersed in the ritual of confession that is a necessary prerequisite to communion with one’s redeemer. Though Millard argues that “children cannot redeem their parents” but “can only replace” them, Cordelia’s sacrificial death, her restoration of the integrity of ritual, and her female piety bring Lear as close to redemption as the world of Shakespeare’s play makes possible.68

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CONCLUSION

The effort of Protestant reformers to renegotiate ritual in early modern England coincided with—indeed, was facilitated by—developing views of female piety in a Protestant context, as well as a general suspicion of the “outward signes” that are such a source of anxiety for writers like Stephen Gosson. Cultural attitudes towards women and their roles as managers of ritual, along with the dilemma of seeming versus being, made the Protestant insistence on the separation of sacredness from ceremony more than a matter of theology. Debora Shuger notes that the paradoxical (if predictable) impact of Protestant revisionism in this regard was “a massive endeavor to instantiate the holy in some sort of institutional form.” One implication of this shift is, according to Shuger, an early effort to somehow distinguish the sacred from the political. Another result of the extraction of what is “holy” from its formerly acceptable religious rituals is its domestication. As the church ceased to provide a forum for the enactment of necessary rituals of restoration or redemption, the domestic duties of women became increasingly spiritualized, creating a space in which such practices could continue.

When the secular theatre—also an alternative forum for the display of ritual—stages female rituals, its representations put into dialogue a number of cultural and religious views. Sarah Beckwith points out that early criticism of drama was “severely evolutionary” in its attempts to demonstrate “how drama emerged out of the ritual form of liturgy,” and observes that the more recent approach to scholarship of drama as it relates to ritual is more “pliable” and “nuanced.” Though the relationship of ritual to religious doctrine and practice is certainly

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relevant to this project, to view that relationship as strictly “evolutionary”—or to assign to the theatre the precise role religious ritual had previously played—would disregard the complexities of the context in which the practitioners of this theatre wrote and performed. Micheal O’Connell calls the Renaissance stage “the place where the deepest preoccupations of the culture found expression and representation,” a certain “site of religious contestation.” Through this project, in its current and future forms, I aim to participate in a critical dialogue that engages issues of religion as they pertain to the early modern stage in a way that neither reduces them to sweeping generalizations nor ignores them altogether.

Reformers’ anxiety about the “magical efficacy” of certain rituals makes their appearance in the theatre controversial on several levels. The presence of or allusion to these rituals in the period’s drama could simply be an example of “residual belief in (or longing for) sacramental efficacy” that is “reintroduced through the back door,” as Evelyn Tribble says. It could also, however, reflect heightened anxieties concerning the place, potential, and performers of such rituals, despite Protestant attempts at revision. Huston Diehl recognizes the significance of this paradox, claiming that “one of the great achievements of Renaissance tragedy” was “its capacity to capture the mystery of what it would demystify, the allure of what it would master and contain.” Similarly, the stage presence of rituals that served to empower female characters suggests a desire to contain the subversive potential of these practices—for the dramatist, through scripting of such scenes and for the audience, through the voyeuristic viewing of them.

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Further research in this area could include an examination of how female education impacted the woman’s “vocation” as the spiritual nurturer of her family, and in turn, how female literacy may or may not have impacted representations of women in the drama. The influence of Protestant humanism on attitudes towards and perceptions of women is evident, for example, in the sheer volume of Protestant devotional literature addressed specifically to women in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Future work on this topic might also entail an investigation of female prayer in early modern plays, as well as how notions of providence in the period’s drama affirm or deny certain aspects of Protestant theology. If, as Richard Greaves claims, “the English experience” indicates “greater participation by women in the life of the church,” then the particular impact of the Reformation on women, and its expression on the early modern stage, is worth continued exploration.

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