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**Writing with an Iron Pen:  
Gender and Genre in Early American Elegy**

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**Writing with an Iron Pen: Gender and Genre in Early American Elegy**

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**Writing with an Iron Pen:  
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**Abstract:** In my dissertation, “Writing with an Iron Pen: Gender and Genre in Early American Elegy,” I show how the work of early American women poets engages the same generic questions about the process and use of consolation as modern anti-elegies. The first half of the dissertation focuses on poems written by one of America’s earliest poets. In chapters one and two I look to the elegies of Anne Bradstreet to show how, from the first book of poems published by an American colonist, women poets have highlighted the limits of the consolatory elegy when either elegist or elegized was not a valued male member of the community. In chapters three and four, I turn to the Age of Revolutions and eighteenth-century poets Hannah Griffitts and Phillis Wheatley. Their elegies, I argue, extend and expand grief even as they refuse the sympathetic identifications that, in contemporary poems, offer opportunities for demonstrations of sympathy key to the earliest formations of American national identity. Ultimately, I suggest, early American women’s poetry offers another location from which to contest the problems of affect, power, identity, and community posed by the conventional elegy.

## Table of Contents

Introduction - Mapping Elegy.....	1
The Difficult Economy of Consolation.....	3
Early American Elegy.....	7
Gender and Genre in Early America.....	12
Female Elegy .....	20
Chapter One - Sparing Fame:	
Anne Bradstreet and the Pastoral Elegy.....	25
The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America.....	31
Sparing Fame: Bradstreet and the Pastoral Tradition .....	35
Chapter Two - Say He's Merciful:	
Anne Bradstreet's Family Elegies .....	72
Argument Enough: Bradstreet and the Puritan Funeral Elegy.....	73
Mouths Put in the Dust: Bradstreet's Late Family Elegies .....	97
Chapter Three - Sighs to their Sighs:	
Hannah Griffiths's Sympathetic Identifications .....	114
Your Fidelity: Hannah Griffiths and her Sororal Network .....	119
Flattering Tongues: The Funeral Elegy in the Eighteenth Century ...	125
Waked to Ecstasy: The Proto-Romantic Elegy .....	134
Beloved Grief: The Sentimental Elegy .....	144
No Earthly Ties: Griffiths's Radical Sympathy .....	155
Chapter Four - Making Friends with Death:	
Melancholic Anger in Phillis Wheatley's Infant Elegies .....	164
No More with Joy: Melancholia and Elegy .....	166
The Life of the Afric Muse .....	170
By No Misery Moved: The Limits of Sympathy .....	175
O Death: Wheatley's Infant Elegies .....	183

Afterward - The Unexpected Hopefulness of Elegy .....	206
Works Cited .....	211

## *Introduction*

### **Mapping Elegy**

To write about elegy, as to write elegy, is to reckon distance. How do we measure the space between those who are gone and those who have been left behind, between mourners and those unburdened by loss, between writing and grieving? I want to start at the end. Anne Bradstreet closes her elegy for her granddaughter Elizabeth by bowing under “His hand alone that guides nature and fate” (19). The last lines of Phillis Wheatley’s elegy for the infant C.E. offer an image of heavenly “pleasures without measure, without end” (46). And after fifty years of writing annual poems to commemorate her mother’s death, Hannah Griffitts concludes her elegiac cycle by suggesting that the heavenly reunion awaiting her is “enough; if favor’d, thus, at last, /A healing Balm, for all the past” (“1803” 25-26). For readers of contemporary American elegy, these images of resignation and heavenly consolation invoke yet another distance; it’s hard to find in the closing lines of these elegies any of the spirit of their twentieth and twenty-first century counterparts. How do we measure the space between Bradstreet’s submission to a heavenly father and Plath’s defiant curse: “Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I’m through”?



The resistance and anger we find in Plath's poem is characteristic of the genre in the modern age. Although the elegy has always included poems that attack the dead or refuse consolation, the anti-elegy, once the transgression that made the norm visible, has become the dominant mode of a genre incapable of answering the unspeakable losses of the twentieth century. Modern anti-elegists resist and rewrite generic conventions, refusing consolation and attacking themselves, the dead, and the elegy itself. Finding comfort in neither religion nor art nor an idealized image of the lost beloved, these poets foreground in their elegies what Jahan Ramazani calls "the economic problem of mourning," that is, "the exchange of the work for the life...the gain of poetic benefit from human loss" (343).

It is here that we may begin to close the distance between Plath and Bradstreet, Griffiths, and Wheatley. Because they often write in the "low" form of the funeral elegy, because they turn to religion to answer their losses, because they attack neither their dead nor themselves, their poems are most often read as acceptances or recapitulations of received generic codes. But the consolation that these women offer in their poems – when they offer it – is one that they only achieve by remaking the genre to speak to their grief. Like modern anti-elegists, they revise conventions that fail to comfort them. They question both the efficacy of and the motivation behind elegiac consolation. And while they do not angrily renounce their dead, neither do they unquestioningly cling to them. Most importantly, they refuse to accept a consolation that would trade on their losses. Writing of the contemporary anti-elegy, R. Clifton Spargo argues that it functions as "a species of ethical complaint, turning against the history of consolation the poet-mourner

inherits as normative in her society” (417). Refusing to offer their personal losses as vehicles for communal consolation, Bradstreet, Griffiths, and Wheatley, like modern anti-elegists, respond to the crisis that arises when a genre cannot answer the needs of its practitioners. In their complex negotiations with, and remaking of, the conventions and mechanics of consolation they write poems that are as much about the elegy itself, its uses and its limits, as they are about the ones they mourn.

### *I. The Difficult Economy of Consolation*

Speaking to both the living and the dead, the elegy is a Janus of a poem. One face is turned to the past, eyes fixed on the lost, while the other looks the future and the forward-spinning world the dead have left behind. The grief-work undertaken in the elegy is therefore twofold. Seeking to reckon the distance between the elegist and the lost subject, these poems engage personal grief, mourning a particular, unrepeatable loss. But because the genre also speaks to the distance between the elegist and the rest of the living world, it clears a space for the poet to address larger questions of mortality. The elegy may exist in the popular imagination as a poem in which we mourn the dead, but it is also, perhaps more so, a poem in which we address our own existential grief. Speaking to one loss, we speak to the idea of loss itself. Although the subgenres of elegy organize this speech in different ways, almost all elegiac theory shares the recognition that the “work of mourning” performed by the genre is one both artistic and psychological, that the elegy is, as Ramazani writes, “a mimesis of mourning” (28). Perhaps it is due to this twofold labor that contemporary theories of elegy tend to avoid the purely taxonomic impulse for which genre studies are often criticized. Instead of cataloguing and

categorizing the conventions that make up various elegiac subgenres, critics read these conventions as the poetic equivalents of social mourning practices that, engaged by the poet, come together to form the mechanics of consolation, the psychological process through which the poem offers answers to personal and to existential grief.

Because theories of anti-elegy tend to read those poems as rebellions against the conventions and consolatory mechanics of the pastoral, I'll begin by summarizing Peter Sacks's influential argument about the way that the subgenre facilitates grief-work before turning to Jahan Ramazani's theory of the modern anti-elegy. In section two of this introduction, I'll explain why early America offers a particularly appealing, if neglected context for exploring the negotiations between personal and existential consolation in the elegy. I'll move on to arguments about the ways Bradstreet, Griffiths, and Wheatley engage these dual elegiac consolations before providing a brief overview of current theories of women's elegiac production to show how this project may offer us new ways of theorizing the history of elegy in the context of early American literary history and studies of women's writing.

In *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, Peter Sacks focuses on the "high cultural" form of the pastoral elegy, arguing that the "successful" elegy is one that facilitates the poet's work of mourning, leading him through grief to consolation. Drawing on Freud's formulation of "normal mourning," Sacks proposes that the conventions of the pastoral be read as the poetic equivalents of social mourning practices, rituals designed to help the mourner withdraw libido from the lost object and reinvest it in a new object of affection. The lists of flowers conventional in pastoral

elegies, for example, he reads as recollections of the blooms pinned to coffin lids, both gestures of obeisance to the lost and “demarcations separating the living from the dead” (19). Such elegiac conventions facilitate both personal and existential consolation, teaching the poet the value of substitution (Sacks notes that, within the elegy, flowers are often compared to poetic language) even as they work to honor the subject that the elegy seeks to mourn. And the acceptance of substitution is particularly important to the work of the pastoral, which Sacks reads in terms of its long tradition as a poem written to honor a poet-forebear. He suggests that the pastoral ultimately achieves consolation by offering a heavenly or artistic apotheosis for its subject and situating the elegist himself as a replacement for the poet he mourns. As a result, the consolation of the pastoral is dependent upon an elegist both willing and able to fully divorce himself from the dead, since

few elegies can be fully read without an appreciation of their frequently combative struggles for inheritance...It is clear that since the time of Moschus’s lament for Bion, many elegies pivot around the issue of poetic inheritance. (37)

Noting that in ancient Greece the right to mourn was legally tied to the right to inherit, Sacks traces a history of pastoral elegy wherein personal grief both triggers and is resolved by existential consolation (37). The poet comforts himself in the face of loss by immortalizing the dead beloved and ensuring that his fame will continue beyond his death, and the very poem that answers this personal grief also reassures the poet in the

face of existential anxieties, positioning him as the latest in a long line of immortal artists, and itself as evidence of his artistic, and surviving, powers.

While Sacks offers a reading of pastoral elegy that stresses the way the mechanics of the subgenre offer personal and existential consolation to the poet in order to bring him back into the community, Jahan Ramazani contends that modern elegies primarily function as sites of resistance to “a social order that would pathologize and expel the bereaved” (13). Arguing that “the elegy flourishes in the modern period by becoming anti-elegiac (in generic terms) and melancholic (in psychological terms),” he traces the ways that modern poets revise a genre no longer capable of addressing their grief (xi). Instead of accepting a “facile poetic therapy,” he argues, modern elegists use these poems to refuse consolation, extending their mourning by attacking themselves, the genre, and their dead (7). Expanding rather than resolving grief, the modern anti-elegy serves to highlight the failures of a genre whose conventions no longer offer solace in an era whose losses include not only victims of war and illness but also “God’s death, the withdrawal of nature’s consolatory powers...and the disappearance of the individual from the mystic pad of history” (37).

To explain the mechanics by which these poems resist consolation, Ramazani turns to the Freudian idea of melancholia, which the psychiatrist posits as a “pathological” alternative to the “normal mourning” that Sacks locates at the heart of the consolatory mechanics of pastoral. In Freud’s conception of melancholia, the mourner refuses to relinquish his dead beloved and instead incorporates the lost into his own ego. Eventually, the anger toward the dead that would normally facilitate separation is

redirected toward the melancholic's own ego, as he attacks both himself and the mourned subject with whom he has identified. Noting that many modern elegists are more than willing to divorce themselves from their subjects, Ramazani adapts Freud's term to suggest that modern elegies are "melancholic" not in their identification with the dead but instead in their demonstration of mourning that is "unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (4). Refusing to accept the consolations offered by the genre, Ramazani argues, modern anti-elegies mourn "not only their proclaimed loss but also the decline of the very form through which they lament" (37).

## *II. Early American Elegy*

Reading the work of Bradstreet, Griffiths, and Wheatley in terms of modern anti-elegy offers productive ways of refining our understanding of both their poems and of anti-elegy itself. As Ramazani's figuration of the modern anti-elegy as a resistance to a dominant "social order" suggests, the anti-elegy rebels against the genre's power to organize and control mourning. Closing the distance between the mourner and the rest of the community, the elegy brings the mourner back into the fold of the living and in so doing redirects the energy of grief toward maintenance of social codes. In her call for a political reading of the genre, Louise Fradenburg insists:

We need to understand how the elegy presents itself as representing the external authorities (Nature, God, Necessity, Being-unto-Death) to which we are supposed to submit. But we also need to understand how the elegy *creates* and *produces* authority *as* external, inevitable – as something to

which we must submit if we are to inherit, if anyone is to listen to us or speak to us, if nothing else is to be taken from us. Elegies construct power. (184)

Resisting the mechanisms through which elegies provide consolation, anti-elegies draw attention the way the genre encodes and enforces such power. R. Clifton Spargo therefore sees all anti-elegies, even those that attack the dead, as poems that engage the “economic problem of mourning.” Refusing an idealization of the lost beloved, the anti-elegy resists the personal consolation and the existential consolation through which the pastoral elegy redirects the energy of grief. The anti-elegy, he writes, “opposes this maintenance of the social order on the ethical grounds that, if the other can be too easily recollected and made part of the collective meaning, the social forms of commemoration would seem only to repeat the forgetfulness an elegist would decry” (*Ethics* 135).

Because one of the conventions of early American elegy is the construction of a singular mourning body, colonial and Revolutionary America provide particularly compelling settings for tracing the power dynamics at play in the elegy (Silverman 127). In these poems, the existential consolation of the elegy becomes a forceful tool for maintaining social order, addressing the existential fears not of one elegist but of a community of mourners, and reinscribing the values of that community as it does so. In *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning*, Mitchell Breitwieser argues that Puritanism itself was “in large measure an attempt to sublimate mourning, to block and then redirect its vigor to various social purposes.” (8)

When we look to the consolatory mechanics that underlie the work of consolation in the Puritan funeral elegy, we can see how the existential consolation provided by these poems redirects grief, unifying the community of mourners and reinforcing the values by which that community is defined. As Ivy Schweitzer notes, the images of fallen “gapsmen” that pervade the Puritan funeral elegy signify a loss that is a very real threat to the community. The death of a valued male saint is like

the loss of a vital stone in the wall that Puritan New England built to protect itself from God’s wrath and from the threats of infidels and apostates, both within and without. This language describes a vulnerable collective self obsessed with integrity, purity, conformity, and the insulation of the ‘body politic’ of the theocratic commonwealth (63).

Answering personal grief through existential consolation, the Puritan funeral elegy ensures that the death that jeopardizes the community will be addressed in a way that facilitates the preservation of an already-injured “body politic.”

Jeffrey Hammond emphasizes the communal nature of elegiac mourning in early America and traces the way that the elegy addresses important losses by outlining the distinction between “natural” and “spiritual” sorrow. He argues that one of the major functions of the Puritan funeral elegy is to transform the “natural” grief that attends the loss of a spiritual leader into a “spiritual” grief for the sins that have prompted god’s displeasure, a displeasure evidenced by the loss the community now mourns. Just as the pastoral elegist, in creating a poem worthy of the subject he honors also creates the means by which he will replace him, the Puritan funeral elegist calls on the community to



emulate the lost saint, and so doing display the very qualities that will allow them to follow him to heaven. As Schweitzer notes, the Puritan funeral elegy's evocation of a "collective social self [therefore] insists upon a regimentation of selfhood to a strict social norm" that serves to reinforce "the values of a patriarchal theocracy" (43).

Although most of the eighteenth century saw a turn away from the communal elegy that so effectively engaged and managed grief, the losses of the American Revolution prompted a return within the genre to its collective address. As Max Cavitch argues, the war prompted an outpouring of elegiac production,

a wealth of elegies that reflected back to their audience various images of a country in tears. Such idealizing images encouraged members of what was in reality a riven and uncertain populace to understand themselves as representatives of a nationally unified mourning subject (81).

And though Cavitch is one of the few to study the role of the elegy in Revolutionary American culture, recent work on early American political writing, plays, and novels posit grief as an important nationalizing affect.<sup>1</sup> Faced with the trauma and losses of the Revolutionary War, America became, as Cavitch writes, "a nation that wept itself into being" (81). Answering personal loss with public, communal mourning and consolation, elegies offered opportunities for demonstrations of sympathetic identification that both served to both create and silence national subjects.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Ellison's readings of the elegies of Ann Eliza Bleeker are another notable exception. See *Cato's Tears* 136-142. For arguments about mourning and nation-formation, see Coviello, "Agonizing Affection," Stern, *The Plight of Feeling*, Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, and Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies*.

<sup>2</sup> See Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, 63

The elegy in early America, therefore, offers us a particularly useful site for examining the pressures of elegiac consolation. Yet although they engage any number of modern American poems, theorists of anti-elegy resolutely neglect a funeral tradition so popular that Robert Henson argues it is the first “coherent body of [American] verse” (27). While Ramazani concedes that Bradstreet “subtly foreshadow[s]” the concerns of modern elegists “by allowing glimpses into her personal suffering, and by holding off the more elaborate devices of the genre,” and that Wheatley’s “consolatory elegies, ever lifting the dead into heavenly light, also give voice to the specific anger and hope of the *Afric* muse,” his engagement with the generic conventions of the funeral elegy is limited to his observation that

The popularity and abundance of the elegy in America has left it vulnerable to frequent ridicule. By the time that Benjamin Franklin castigated American elegies as “wretchedly Dull and Ridiculous,” the genre already seemed threatened with rigor mortis by formula. (223, 136, 216)

Even in the chapter on “American Family Elegies” that prompted this assessment, Ramazani reads poems in terms of a tradition traced “from Moschus to Swinburne” (221). But while the “high cultural” pastoral tradition certainly shapes the way modern poets think about the work of anti-elegy, the “low cultural” funeral tradition also reflects and influences the history of American mourning, a history with which modern anti-elegists must contend. As Claire Buck argues in her essay on the sentimental elegy,

If the work of mourning is also the work of cultural transmission, then we

need to be careful about what disappears from view as a result of tracing a single line of descent for twentieth-century anti-elegy from the classic and classical English tradition of Milton's 'Lycidas' and Shelley's 'Adonais.'  
(432)

It is not the goal of this project to establish a through-line from early American elegists to their contemporary American counterparts. However, I do believe that in tracing the ways that these women deployed elements of anti-elegy within their poems in order to resist existential consolation we can expand our understanding of women's writing, early American elegy, and the anti-elegy itself.

### *III. Gender and Genre in Early America*

One of the most important restructurings of current approaches to elegy that this study undertakes is a resistance to the tendency, perhaps inherited from Freud, to class elegy as either "consolatory" or "nonconsolatory." In *Beyond Consolation*, Melissa Zenger highlights some of the limitations of such a framework. She identifies, particularly in modern women's elegies, what she describes as a "doubleness," the "oscillations between conflictual dramas enacted, even in the angriest of these poems, between associations and distancing" (64).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Ramazani concedes that even within

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<sup>3</sup> Zeiger organizes her reading by looking to the ways that elegies of the nineteenth and twentieth century rely on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as a foundational myth and poetic precedent. Reading poems in terms of their engagement with, and revision of, the myth, she argues for a reading practice focused on the relationship between elegists and the dead they mourn. While this project answers Zeiger's call for a reading that revises and expands the division between "consolatory" and "nonconsolatory" elegy, I'm not certain how effectively her reading practice would transfer to elegies written before the nineteenth century. She herself begins by focusing on Swinbourne's 1867 "Ave atque Vale," which "undertakes a revision of elegiac ideology, reexamining the originary status of Orpheus" (26). Zeiger therefore positions

the primarily melancholic poems he studies, elegists “achieve a unique balance between the elegiac and the anti-elegiac, between consolatory and melancholic mourning” (361). Even so, it’s easy to see why critics tend to class elegies in this way: ultimately, the poet must either accept consolation or not. Protests against the resolution of grief, once overcome, only add to the consolatory force of the poem, demonstrating the genre’s power to effectively answer even those losses that seem unanswerable.

By addressing the ways that poets like Bradstreet and Griffiths work toward personal consolation while refusing its existential counterpart, I hope to offer a way of understanding how elegies may speak to a particular loss even as they refuse to trade on that loss, how they may simultaneously resist consolation and accept it. Early American women’s poetry, I argue, provides a useful site for exploring this tension. As we have seen, within the consolatory mechanics of both the pastoral elegy and its Puritan funeral counterpart, personal consolation sparks, and is resolved by, its existential counterpart. For poets like Milton or Auden, then, consolation is all or nothing, an offering that they may resist or delay but must ultimately either accept or reject. But this project begins with the recognition that the consolatory apparatus of elegy in early America begins to falter when women are placed at the center of the poem. Tracing the operations of personal and existential consolation through the subgenres of pastoral, Puritan funeral, sentimental, and proto-Romantic elegies, I argue that, because the conventions of these genres were not designed to accommodate female elegists or lost subjects, the relationship between personal and existential consolation differs for female elegists, that

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Swinburne’s poem as the first of the “‘new’ elegy” (25).

the existential consolation through which the elegy calms mourners' fears of death and redirects their energy into maintaining the social order functions, for female elegists, independently from the personal consolation that speaks to a particular grief.

Reading the works of Anne Bradstreet, Hannah Griffitts, and Phillis Wheatley in terms of anti-elegy, I explore the ways that these women revised and rewrote the conventions of elegy in order to resist communal, existential consolation. These poets, I argue, engage the anti-elegiac resistance to existential consolation without first attacking or neglecting those they mourn. Because the conventional idealization of the lost through which the elegy facilitates personal consolation will not, for them, lead to existential consolation, they may use these poems to honor their own losses without trading on them. As they do so, they explicitly engage the limits of genre itself, highlighting their exclusion from a consolatory apparatus in which personal consolation invokes, and is answered by, its existential counterpart.

My dissertation begins with "Sparing Fame: Anne Bradstreet and the Pastoral Elegy." Looking to Bradstreet's engagement with the "high cultural" pastoral tradition, I argue that her elegies for Du Bartas and Sidney may be understood as anti-elegiac poems that question the mechanics of consolation within the pastoral elegy. In these poems, Bradstreet highlights the way that she, as a woman, is barred from participating in the model of inheritance and replacement that provides the pastoral's existential consolation even as she calls our attention to the exchange of death for fame on which the model is based. In her elegy for Sir Philip Sidney, Bradstreet employs and deforms key conventions of the pastoral tradition including the elegist's place at the head of a chorus

of mourners, the invocation of the muse, and the humility topos, to trace the limits of elegiac convention in addressing the grief of female poets. Chased from Parnassus by a pack of angry muses, Bradstreet's ultimate abandonment of the elegiac task is, I argue, tantamount to a recusal from the exchange of the pastoral. In her elegy for Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, Bradstreet envisions a possibility for pastoral elegy that might offer existential consolation to female mourners. Blending the "high" and "low" forms of the genre to combine the fame-based consolation of the pastoral elegy with the virtue-based consolation of the Puritan funeral elegy, she creates a poem in which she might, following Du Bartas's Christian example, assume control of the moral instruction of her child muse, redirecting his praise of Du Bartas's poetic accomplishments toward the Christian virtues that could provoke a turn to "spiritual mourning." However, I argue, although Bradstreet creates a poem in which she might assert a uniquely female authority to access existential consolation, she ultimately refuses to translate the death of her poetic idol into an opportunity for existential consolation.

In the second chapter, "Say He's Merciful: Anne Bradstreet's Family Elegies," I turn to the Puritan funeral elegy, the genre that informs the rest of this study. Tracing the mechanics of consolation in the genre, we find that when the lost beloved is anyone other than a departed male saint, the personal consolation and the existential consolation of the subgenre uncouple. Reading Bradstreet's elegy for Queen Elizabeth as a poem in which she tests and critiques the consolatory mechanics of the Puritan funeral elegy, I argue that although poems for women or children might access both types of consolation, the translation of "natural" grief into its "spiritual" counterpart that addresses both personal

and existential consolation in elegies for departed male saints does little to address personal grief in poems for less-valued members of the community. Reading Bradstreet's elegies for her daughter-in-law Mercy and her grandchildren Elizabeth, Anne, and Simon, I show how she highlights the flimsiness of the genre's personal consolation even as she resists the turn to "spiritual mourning" through which the genre would have her address her existential grief. Bradstreet presents the two assertions through which the Puritan funeral elegy answers personal grief – that the dead is content in heaven, and that the death is god's will – as increasingly unsatisfying answers to death. As her personal losses accumulate (two of her grandchildren and a beloved daughter-in-law died between June and November of 1669), Bradstreet becomes increasingly resistant to an elegiac consolation that amounts to little more than mere assertion. Ultimately, I argue, these family elegies trace more than just the limits of elegiac consolation; they question whether such consolation is possible or even desirable.

The second half of the dissertation moves to the Revolutionary era to engage two groups of poems that extend grief to a degree that Bradstreet's elegies do not. However, just as Bradstreet resists the turn to existential "spiritual mourning" that reinforces social order but does little to address her personal grief, Hannah Griffitts and Phillis Wheatley engage and reject the sympathetic identifications through which mourners in the early republic seek to redirect grief toward national identification. Chapter three, "Sighs to Their Sighs: Hannah Griffitts's Sympathetic Identifications," examines the fifty-year elegiac cycle produced by the Philadelphia Quaker poet. After her mother's passing in 1751, Griffitts wrote an elegy on the anniversary of her death each year for more than

half a century. Although she has not yet been the subject of much critical attention, Griffitts did publish a few poems in Philadelphia newspapers, and she circulated her poems widely within a circle of fellow poets in the Delaware Valley. Her extraordinary elegiac cycle, which she began twenty-four years before the war began and continued until twenty years after its end makes her a useful study for tracing elegiac resistance in Revolutionary America. This chapter situates Griffitts's work within a network of elegiac subgenres including the Puritan funeral elegy, the proto-Romantic elegy, and the sentimental elegy. Like Bradstreet, I argue, Griffitts engages multiple subgenres to highlight the ways that her position as a woman poet limits her access to consolation. Although she draws on the sentimental elegy to extend her mourning and to insist upon the value of the mother she's lost, Griffitts ultimately refuses to assume the role of inconsolable mourner, disallowing a sympathetic identification from her readers that would require her to abandon her pursuit of personal consolation. Instead, Griffitts establishes what I call a "radical sympathy" between herself and her mother. Serving to extend her grief and to dramatize her difficulty in overcoming it, Griffitts's cycle ultimately offers the narrative of a woman's submission to the will of God. Accounting for her abandonment of "earthly ties," these elegies provide evidence of her spiritual worthiness as she prepares herself for a heavenly reunion with the mother she mourns. Like proto-Romantic elegists, I argue, Griffitts self-consciously trades on her own sadness, but instead of translating her depth of feeling into poetic acclaim or a pain that might be answered through sympathetic identification, she uses her suffering as qualification for heavenly reunion, thereby redirecting the impulse of existential



consolation to answer personal grief.

In chapter four, “Making Friends With Death: Melancholic Anger in Phillis Wheatley’s Child Elegies,” I turn to one of Griffiths’s contemporaries, the enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley. Like Griffiths, Wheatley demonstrates the limits, and uses, of sympathetic identification within the genre. Her position as an “Afric muse” offers her a paradoxical authority when it came to writing about death, an authority predicated on her own well-known losses. In my study of three Puritan funeral elegies, “A Funeral POEM on the Death of C.E., an Infant of Twelve Months,” “On the Death of J.C. an Infant,” and, “To Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, on the death of their Infant Son,” I trace the ways that Wheatley deploys the consolatory apparatus of the subgenre in surprisingly modern ways, attacking both the dead and the mourners they’ve left behind. Refusing to mobilize her own losses in service of others’ grief, Wheatley writes elegies that disallow both reunion and redemption, poems that, like modern anti-elegies, insist upon mourning without end. Though it is common to read Wheatley’s elegies with an eye to the way she speaks for the dead in these poems, I examine the way she speaks to, and for, the living. Ultimately, I argue, Wheatley uses these elegies to critique early American systems of sympathetic exchange that would tie her poetic authority to her willingness to become an object of sympathetic identification. In so doing, she both engages the anger of modern anti-elegy and suggests that there are some losses from which recovery is impossible.

Wheatley’s melancholic anger serves to align her, more than either of the other poets I study here, with the anti-elegy. However, I would argue that what each of these women share with their twentieth-century counterparts, and what other early anti-elegies

lack, is an almost adversarial relationship not only with social practices of mourning, but with the genre itself. The anti-elegy, Spargo argues, “perceives a gap between the intentions of the tradition (which seek a resolution of loss and a perpetuation of the social order) and present loss (which by its very irresolution would stand for the value of the other)” (133). The anti-elegy thus becomes an ethical stance in which the poet refuses to participate in the conventional elegiac commemoration that would answer his personal loss with an existential consolation that serves to maintain the social order.

Such a reading, however, is dependent upon a genre that is capable of such recuperation. As Spargo notes,

as long as our cultural traditions of identity remain in place and the conventions of the genre seem adequate to those social meanings derived and maintained through cultural traditions, the commemorative task has the capacity to resolve itself idealistically...to restore ideal meaning through the elegist’s ideal(izing) memory. (135)

But part of the reason that the anti-elegy has become the dominant mode of the genre in the twentieth century is that the elegy is no longer capable of such recuperation, since the conventions that form the mechanics of consolation have been emptied of meaning by the losses of the modern era. In tracing the ways that the operations of existential and personal consolation function differently for women poets than for their male counterparts, I show how Bradstreet, Griffitts, and Wheatley, like modern anti-elegists, write in a genre already lost to them. Their revisions and critiques of generic conventions, which resist the normative impulse of consolatory elegy, are undoubtedly an

ethical stance. But they are also a necessity.

Throughout his reading of the modern anti-elegy, Ramazani figures twentieth-century poets as mourners of multiple losses. In the modern era, we find not only “every poem an epitaph,” as Eliot suggested, but also, for anti-elegists, “every elegy is an elegy for elegy – a poem that mourns the diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning” (Ramazani 9). Of course, as Ramazani points out, the relationship between modern anti-elegists and the genre in which they write more closely parallels Freud’s description of melancholia than of “normal mourning,” since anti-elegists refuse to release the lost genre, instead incorporating its failed conventions and structures into poems that turn their attacks on the genre itself. Yet there is one aspect of Freudian melancholia which Ramazani’s formulation neglects: Freud suggests that the melancholic may mourn an ideal, something she’s never had. This, I argue, is the position from which Bradstreet, Griffiths, and Wheatley write. Crafting elegies that work to honor the dead without trading on those losses, they create poems that focus as much on the failures of elegy to answer the actual task of mourning as on the failures of mourning to answer the actual fact of loss.

#### *IV. Female Elegy*

Locating these poems within particular historical, social, and poetic communities, I hope to avoid proposing a totalizing reading of women’s approaches to poetic mourning. In fact, even within the poets I study, we find varying degrees of acceptance of elegiac conventions. The framework of the Puritan funeral elegy easily accommodates

Bradstreet's elegy for her father, Griffiths was more than happy to offer sympathy in elegies for Revolutionary war soldiers, and Wheatley's elegy for Whitefield engages none of the anger toward survivors we find in her child-loss poems. However, by focusing on the relationship between gender and generic conventions, my project also necessarily engages the influential theory of "female elegy" proposed by Celeste Schenck.

Like Ramazani, Schenck traces a strain of anti-consolatory elegy that resists the conventions through which the pastoral speaks to personal and existential grief. Instead of taking the historically situated approach Ramazani uses, however, Schenck turns to gender, proposing a tradition of what she calls "female elegy." Although she does not allude to Freud in her work, her theory is clearly engaged with the melancholic: while Ramazani adopts only the second half of Freudian melancholia in his exploration of modern elegy, Schenck adopts only the first for her theory of women's elegy. Citing the model of "competition and replacement" that Sacks locates at the core of the pastoral elegy's consolatory apparatus, Schenck argues that "the task of the male elegist reflects certain psychic models, which seem...inappropriate to inscribe female experience" (15). Unwilling to replace the subjects of their elegies, she suggests, women poets cling to those they mourn, refusing to relinquish their dead. Schenck argues that women elegists offer a site of resistance to those who might not value their losses by maintaining connections with those for whom they grieve. Therefore, she suggests, "mourning without end is perhaps the female elegist's most characteristic subversion of the masculine elegiac" (24).

There are several features of Schenck's argument that are attractive. Although her transhistorical approach fails to account for the different conventions of elegiac subgenres and her argument about women's mourning practices is problematic in its totality, we can certainly trace a long tradition of poems by women poets that resist convention by resisting consolation entirely. Indeed, the much-remarked "feminization" of the genre that accompanied the dominance of the sentimental elegy in the nineteenth century is marked by a refusal of consolation and an insistence on grief.

And Schenck's approach also raises two important issues in regard to women and the elegy: it speaks to the failures of conventions when women write elegy, and it speaks of the inadequacy of the genre to answer losses that may not be recognized by the larger community. Her theory also aligns women's elegy with anti-elegy by reading refusal of consolation as an ethical stance.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Schenck's model differs from anti-elegy in key ways. First, like the poems by Bradstreet and Griffitts that I study, Schenck's poems refuse to attack their dead. Although their attachment may be figured as a refusal of personal consolation that parallels the similar refusal of anti-elegy, however, it does not necessarily imply an ethical rejection of existential consolation. Indeed, as Allison Giffen points out, an insistence on unending mourning may also be an authorizing position from which a

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<sup>4</sup> This reading also aligns Schenck with contemporary theorists of productive melancholia, who argue that identification with the dead serves two significant social functions: first, by maintaining a connection, it asserts the value of the lost beloved. Secondly, by refusing to sever attachment and "move on," it offers melancholic mourners a site of resistance to dominant social norms that would not value the deceased. In their theories on racial melancholia, for example, David Eng and Shinhee Han read identification as "the ego's melancholic yet militant refusal to allow certain objects to disappear into oblivion...If the loved object is not going to live out there, the melancholic emphatically avers, then it is going to live here with me" (365).

woman poet may enter the literary marketplace (224). And, as I'll explore further in my studies of Griffitts and Wheatley, the position of the inconsolable mourner may also invite the kind of sympathetic identification that redirects individual grief toward community formation. Secondly, such a reading overlooks the particular revisions and dislocations of elegiac codes through which poets resist the normalizing consolation of the elegy. Failing to differentiate between the consolatory mechanics and conventions of the pastoral elegy and the modern elegy, for example, Schenck reads Anne Bradstreet's elegy for Sir Philip Sidney not as a critique of the genre, but as a failure that demonstrates its limits. In her conflation of mourning and poetic practices – her reading of women's resistance as a psychological, rather than poetic, protest - Schenck suggests that unending mourning itself constitutes a "female" rebuke to the genre. But as Jahan Ramazani points out, this formula fails to account for the angry elegies of the twentieth century in which female poets, as much as their male counterparts, use the genre to attack their dead (298). Finally, by reading the refusal of consolation in the poems she studies as evidence of women's mourning practice rather than its poetic counterpart, Schenck reinstates the association of women with unanswerable grief that persists in stereotypes that continue in the genre, and the culture, today. As Melissa Zeiger writes, "For women, as opposed to men, an alliance and continuity with the dead, and hence a rejection of canonical poetic identity and succession, dangerously reinstate the old Orphean associations of women with death, silence, darkness" (64).

By reading the elegies of Bradstreet, Griffitts, and Wheatley in terms of modern anti-elegy, my project sets out to disrupt such associations. That said, I do not want to

suggest that these poets wrote modern anti-elegies. They did not. They could not. Even Wheatley, whose melancholic anger most closely parallels the modern anti-elegy's attacks on, or indifference to, the dead, directs her anger away from herself and her own losses. Instead, I hope that this reading will show how early American women's poetry offers another location from which to contest the problems of affect, power, identity, and community posed by the conventional elegy. Like modern anti-elegists, these poets write within a genre that must fail them, that has already failed them. Looking to the way they negotiate the distances invoked by all elegy, limning the space between themselves and their losses, their communities, and the genre in which they write, we find that these women, barred by custom and law from occupying the conventional position of the elegist as a designated mourner of a loss both personal and public, nonetheless turned to the genre for the same reasons any poet does – to answer death with art. In choosing, contesting, and ultimately re-creating the elegiac tradition, they reveal to us an American literary history that is always, already, making it new.

## *Chapter One*

### **Sparing Fame: Anne Bradstreet and The Pastoral Elegy**

In 1867, John Harvard Ellis edited the first complete collection of Anne Bradstreet's writings. In addition to poems originally published in 1650 and 1678, the book includes several of Bradstreet's prose meditations, as well some previously unpublished verses that are now among her most famous. Ellis transcribed these texts himself from "a small manuscript book which belonged to the author and which [had] been kept, since her death, as a precious relic by her descendants" (viii). For the frontispiece he chose an etching titled "Bradstreet House, North Andover, Mass." The book contains no images of Bradstreet herself; none exist. But by opening with a picture of her home, Ellis seems to offer it to us as a replacement, and in some ways it fits: the tidiness of the white two-story house and the gently sloping lawn seems welcoming and offsets the starkness of the bare trees in the foreground. Modern readers familiar with Bradstreet may wonder whether this is the home that burned in the catastrophic fire of 1666 that claimed not only her library but also some of her manuscripts. Such a question would not have occurred to anyone opening the book when it was first published: Ellis's



edition was the first to include Bradstreet's famous "Verses Upon the Burning of our House."

In that poem she acknowledges the seriousness of her loss and dramatizes the process by which she reconciles herself to it. Surveying the ruins of her home, Bradstreet lists the objects and the possibilities that went with the fire, and she takes the time to articulate the depth of her loss:

Under thy roof no guest shall sit,  
Nor at thy table eat a bit.  
No pleasant tale shall 'ere be told,  
Nor things recounted done of old.  
No candle e'er shall shine in thee,  
Nor bridegroom's voice e'er heard shall be.

In silence ever shalt thou lie (33-39)

Before long, however, she looks up from the ashes. Instead of taking her comfort in the knowledge that her family has survived the fire, that her bridegroom's voice might still be heard, Bradstreet expands her mourning for a moment to include the entire world for one brief line – "Adieu, Adieu, all's vanity" – before quickly reining in her lament and reframing her loss as a lesson in the perils of earthly love (40). She begins to question herself:

Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide,  
And did thy wealth on earth abide?  
Didst fix thy hope on mould'ring dust?

The arm of flesh didst make thy trust? (41-44)

And she reminds herself that god will provide her with “a house on high erect/ framed by that mighty architect” (47-48). The poem’s closing couplet answers her questions in the form of a prayer: “The world no longer let me love/ My hope and treasure lies above” (57-58).<sup>5</sup> This is the Bradstreet we read in freshman survey classes or find in anthologies: plainspoken, personal, acknowledging the challenges of accepting god’s will but ultimately committed to doing so. Occasionally a brief survey will include one of the more “worldly” verses she wrote before she moved from Ipswich to Andover: her elegy for Queen Elizabeth, perhaps, in which she argues for women’s equality, or an excerpt from her *Quaternions*, written in the formal style of her poetic idol Du Bartas. But like the illustration, the idea of Bradstreet as a poet of two parts – the first a prisoner of “the ornate Du Bartas shackles” and the second an immensely talented poet whose approachable voice mediates her Puritan piety– is not the whole story (White “Tenth Muse” 61).

The tidy, pleasant house featured in Ellis’s frontispiece is not the house that burned. In fact, as Elizabeth Wade White notes, Bradstreet herself never lived there – although local lore suggested that it was built by Simon Bradstreet immediately after the fire, the house that in Ellis’s time was known as the Bradstreet House was not constructed before 1715 (White *Anne Bradstreet* 226). Yet even so there is a case to be made for its inclusion: the image in place of the ersatz home, that structure standing in for the actual

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<sup>5</sup> Most quotations of Bradstreet’s poems and the prefatory materials come from Jeannine Hensley’s *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (1967). However, for my discussion of Bradstreet’s elegies for Sidney, Du Bartas, and Queen Elizabeth, I refer to the British Library copy of the 1650 edition of *The Tenth Muse*.

Bradstreet house, itself a replacement of the one that burned, and that one standing, in our imaginations, for the poet herself, and in hers for its heavenly counterpart. Each substitution draws our attention to absence even as it provides a recompense for it. Like much of Bradstreet's poetry, the image asks us to look both to and through artistic representation to find a place for loss in the world.

"Verses Upon the Burning of our House" is not, strictly speaking, an elegy. Significant though the loss of her home may have been, it pales in comparison to the losses that would attend Bradstreet through her later years.<sup>6</sup> Yet the poem is undoubtedly a work of mourning, and it manages its loss much in the same way as traditional elegy, carrying the reader with the poet through grief to eventual comfort. As "Verses Upon the Burning of our House" progresses, Bradstreet does bring her personal grief under control. By the time the poem concludes, she has transformed her loss into an opportunity to demonstrate her subservience to god. Indeed, of the poem's 54 lines, 24 are devoted to explaining this shift. The poem's ultimate conclusion, that "there's wealth enough" in heaven, provides evidence of the progression from lament to acceptance and finally reward (51).

Although Bradstreet is clearly willing to exchange the grief that attends the ashes of her former house for the existential assurance of an eternal "home on high," she refuses such trades within her elegies. In the following chapters, I will explore the ways Bradstreet's elegies negotiate the difficult relationship between the personal consolation that the genre offers to answer a particular loss and the existential consolation through

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<sup>6</sup> In the three years following the house fire, Bradstreet lost two grandchildren and a beloved daughter-in-law.

which it allows its practitioners to address their own fears of death by incorporating this loss into larger systems of meaning. Bradstreet, I argue, calls our attention to the ways that the mechanics of consolation use personal grief as a trigger for existential grief, allowing a resolution of the latter to address the former. As she does so, she questions the way these relationships unravel when women poets attempt to use the elegy to address their losses. Ultimately, as both her “worldly” and familial elegies demonstrate, women’s lack of social power means that this transaction, in which a private death is mourned as a public loss, breaks down when women are placed at the center of the elegy. In response, Bradstreet offers up a critique of the consolatory tradition in both the pastoral and the Puritan funeral elegy, laying this brutal exchange bare. Like modern anti-elegies, these poems operate as sites of generic resistance, questioning both the value and the motivation of elegiac consolation and refusing to trade on their losses.

Reading these poems as thoughtful engagements with genre rather than as formulaic or artless expressions of grief provides us with one way of reconciling Bradstreet’s early, formal verses with her later, more personal poems, adding to a recent critical resistance to the suggestion that the “faults of [these early poems] overshadow [their] virtues” (Stanford 10). More significantly, it offers another possibility for the exploration of what Mitchell Breitwieser identifies in *National Melancholy* as a predominantly female American tradition of “renegade or recusant literature” of mourning, one that is not only rooted in the “domestic ideology that assigns stereotyped mourning to women in a gender division of labor” he proposes but also developing as a rebellion against the poetic and generic conventions which would seek to exclude its

authors and devalue those whom they would mourn (72). Tracing in this rebellion a denial of existential consolation rather than a refusal to render up all grief, such a reading resists the critical trend of finding in women's elegies a steadfast resistance to all consolation.

In this first chapter I build on close readings of Bradstreet's elegies for two famous poets, Sir Philip Sidney and Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas. I trace the way Bradstreet turns key conventions of the pastoral tradition against themselves to show how she, as a woman poet, cannot capitalize on the traditional consolatory mechanism of the pastoral that would exchange the "personal" grief evoked by the loss of a poet-forebear for the "existential" consolation that the elegist might replace the poet he or she honors. Revising and remaking tropes like the invocation of the muse, professions of her own humility, and the positioning of the elegist at the head of a chorus of mourners, Bradstreet shows how, for a female elegist, consolation cannot be achieved through an exchange of the subject's death for the elegist's own poetic fame. Ultimately, I argue, she uses her elegy for Sidney to critique this exchange and her elegy for Du Bartas to create a poem that both highlights her position as a female elegist and refuses such impersonal trades. These early poems, as much about the genre of elegy itself as about those they seek to honor, explore and critique the ways that the conventions of pastoral elegy encourage its practitioners to calm their own fears of death by contemplating the deaths of those they claim to love, questioning the methodology, morality, and efficacy of elegiac consolation in ways that prefigure the work of twentieth and twenty-first century anti-elegists.

*I. The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*

In 1650, a new title appeared on the list of London bookseller Stephen Bowtell. From his shop off Lombard Street, he printed and sold copies of the first book of original poems written in America: *THE TENTH MUSE Lately Sprung up in AMERICA. OR POEMS, compiled with great variety of Wit and Learning, full of delight* (Round, 194). Anne Bradstreet's name appeared nowhere on the title page, but readers were informed that the book was written by "a Gentlewoman in those parts." An "Epistle to the Reader" prefaced the edition, attesting to the author's goodness as a wife and mother and assuring readers that the publication was executed without her consent:

I fear the displeasure of no person in the publishing of these poems but the author, without whose knowledge, and contrary to her expectation, I have presumed to bring to public view, what she resolved should (in such a manner) never see the sun; but I found that divers had gotten some scattered papers, affected them well, were likely to have sent forth broken pieces, to the author's prejudice, which I thought to prevent, as well as to pleasure those that earnestly desired the view of the whole. (3)

This introduction was written by Bradstreet's brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, and when a second edition of her poems was issued in 1678, it included support for Woodbridge's claim that he acted independently. In "The Author to Her Book," Bradstreet addresses this first edition, which she calls an

ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain  
Who after birth didst by my side remain

Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,  
Who thee abroad, exposed to public view (2-5).

Though Bradstreet biographer Elizabeth Wade White accepts these claims, referring to Woodbridge's "publishing plot," which included securing introductory poems by nine of his Oxford friends, other critics suggest that Bradstreet may have, in Wendy Martin's words, "sought publication by proxy" (White 257, Martin "Subversive Piety" 27).<sup>7</sup> Whoever was behind the publication of the book, it was a critical and financial success. Even eight years after its publication, "The 10. Muse, a Poem," was listed by William London in his *Catalogue of the Most Vendible Books in England* (Stanford 74).

Regardless of the title's suggestive imagery, Bradstreet did not, of course, simply "spring up" in America. One of six children, Anne Dudley was born in 1612 or 1613 to Thomas and Dorothy Dudley. At the time of Anne's birth, her father clerked for a judge in Northamptonshire, but in 1619 he was named steward to the Earl of Lincoln and moved his family to the Earl's estate at Sempringham. Just two years later, they were joined there by Simon Bradstreet, who became Thomas's assistant. A voracious reader, Anne was schooled in the Elizabethan tradition, and was taught French, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.<sup>8</sup> In 1628, she married Simon. Both Simon Bradstreet and Thomas Dudley were officers in the Massachusetts Bay Joint Stock Company, and in 1630 they and their families departed England with a group of like-minded Puritans including the Lady

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive account of the context of publication of *The Tenth Muse* that supports Martin's argument that Bradstreet was indeed in on the publication of her first edition, see Phillip H. Round, *By Nature and by Custom Cursed*, 153-204.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Wade White suggests that Bradstreet was first exposed to the works of Du Bartas at Sempringham, tracing a connection between the dowager Countess of Lincoln and the poet and physician Thomas Lodge, one of the first translators of Du Bartas into English. See *Anne Bradstreet: The Tenth Muse*. 56-57.

Arabella Johnson, on a ship bearing her name. They arrived in America in July of that year.

In an oft-quoted passage from her prose work “To My Dear Children,” Bradstreet explains her initial resistance to her new home. In America she found “a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose. But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined the church at Boston” (Ellis 5). Indeed, by 1631 the Dudleys and the Bradstreets had established themselves near the Charles River. Yet, as Thomas Dudley noted in a letter to the Countess of Lincoln, the life they made there was one that they fought for. In the six months after their arrival, he estimates that over 200 settlers, the Lady Arabella among them, had died. He writes, “there is not one house where there is not one dead and in some houses many” (qtd. in Martin, “Subversive Piety” 24).

While the Dudley and Bradstreet homes seemed to prove exceptions, there were certainly scares. Anne Bradstreet’s earliest dated poem, from 1632, is entitled “Upon a Fit of Sickness,” and it begins with the speaker convinced that she will not live through her illness:

Twice ten years old not fully told  
since nature gave me breath,  
My race is run, my thread is spun,  
lo, here is fatal death. (1-4)

Of course, she did survive, and in 1633 or 1634, her first son, Samuel Bradstreet, was born. After five or six years of marriage without a child, Samuel was the first of eight children, born before 1652. Remarkably, in a society where one quarter of children died



before they reached the age of ten, all of the Bradstreet children survived childhood (Stannard 55). Yet each of these births was an opportunity for loss, a fact Bradstreet recognized in another of her anticipatory self-elegies, “Before the Birth of One of Her Children.”

In 1635, with young Samuel in tow, the family moved from Boston to Ipswich. Here, in the midst of a society that was, in the words of one visitor, “remarkably cultivated...for a frontier town,” Bradstreet composed much, and possibly all, of her first collection of poetry (qtd. in White 131). Certainly it was in Ipswich that Bradstreet wrote her elegies for Sir Philip Sidney (1638), Guillaume Du Bartas (1641), and Queen Elizabeth (1643). In the same year that Bradstreet wrote the last of these poems, her mother, Dorothy Dudley, passed away. Bradstreet’s “Epitaph On My Dear and Ever Honoured Mother, Mrs. Dorothy Dudley, Who Deceased December 27, 1643, And of her age 61,” written around this time though unpublished until her second edition, sits in clear counterpoint to her poem “In Honour of the High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth, of most happy memory.” The fact that they were written during the same period suggests the break that critics to impose on Bradstreet – the imitator of florid Du Bartas verse who lived at Ipswich and the approachable Puritan poet who resided at Andover – may have less to do with Bradstreet’s developing style and more to do with which poems were chosen for publication, and when.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> One might also compare Bradstreet’s early, unpublished poems, such as “Upon a Fit of Sickness” to some of her later Andover poems to find similarities. Bradstreet’s famous love poems, “To my Dear and Loving Husband,” and “A Letter to her Husband, absent upon Publick Employment” were probably written between 1641 and 1643 (White 126). And although Bradstreet seemed to abandon the style of *The Tenth Muse* after its publication, the fire of 1666 may have destroyed some of those poems. In the 1678 edition,

Around 1645, the Dudleys and the Bradstreets again decamped, moving to their home in Andover. It was also around this time that Bradstreet entrusted her father with a copy of her manuscript. The collection contained a dedicatory poem written for Thomas Dudley, as well as “The Preface,” Bradstreet’s four *Quaternions*, “A Dialogue between Old England and New,” and a section titled “Elegies and Epitaphs,” containing the elegies for Sidney, Du Bartas, and Queen Elizabeth, as well as a rewriting of David’s Lamentation for Saul and a poem titled “The Vanity of all Worldly Creatures.” Dudley passed the manuscript along to John Woodbridge, his daughter Mercy’s husband, and when Woodbridge returned to England in 1647, he took the manuscript with him. Three years later, readers in the metropolis could find Bradstreet’s poems on the shelves of Stephen Bowtell’s shop.

## *II. Sparing Fame: Bradstreet and the Pastoral Tradition*

In his book *By Nature and By Custom Cursed*, Phillip H. Round observes, “the overall theme of [*The Tenth Muse*] is competition – between [Bradstreet’s] father and herself, between the elements, between the humors, and between males and females” (174). Indeed, contemporary readers must have picked up on this thread as well: the first of the prefatory poems, written by Nathaniel Ward, begins with a contest between Bradstreet and her poetic idol Du Bartas.

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Bradstreet does note that her revisions of “The Four Monarchies” continued well past the publication of *The Tenth Muse*, ending the last poem with “An Apologie” in which she explains that “I hours not few did spend/ And weary lines (though lank) I many penned;/ But ‘fore I could accomplish my desire./ My papers fell a pray to th’ raging fire” (3563-3566). Bethany Reid makes a similar observation about the critical tendency to overlook these dates of composition in “‘Unfit for Light’: Anne Bradstreet’s Monstrous Birth.”

Mercury showed Apollo Bartas' book,  
Minerva this, and wished him well to look,  
And tell uprightly, which did which excell,  
He viewed and viewed, and vowed he could not tell. (1-4)

Though Ward's imagined scene of poetic rivalry quickly veers into the sardonic (Mercury and Minerva are unsatisfied with Apollo's deliberate response and "bid him hemisphere his mouldy nose./ With's cracked leering glasses" and answer their question), the competition he describes between an elegist and the poet she elegizes speaks to a central concern of the genre (5-6). This is the contest by which the pastoral elegy provides its existential consolation, for one of the central distinctions between the pastoral and the funeral elegy is the former's use of artistic consolation as a stay against existential grief.

The division between funeral and pastoral elegy may seem firmly established today, but at the time Bradstreet was writing, the formal elegy in England was at the end of a period of transition from primarily funeral to primarily pastoral verse. In her "worldly" elegies, Bradstreet entered a genre still in flux. Although these poems were written fairly early in the English pastoral tradition, it is significant that the one elegy to which she refers by name, Spenser's "Astrophel," is commonly held to be one of the earliest models of the pastoral elegy. And though Sidney is frequently recognized as one of the first pastoral elegists in English, the elegies produced upon his death marked a broader shift within English poetry toward the pastoral. As Dennis Kay argues in *Melodious Tears: The English Funeral Elegy from Spenser to Milton*, by the early part of the seventeenth century, "the dominant influence, the presiding genius, is Spenser: not

only in the deployment of elaborate fictions and allegories, but also in creating congenial, stimulating, highly imitable models for the poet's role." (90)<sup>10</sup>

Milton's "Lycidas," commonly considered the epitome of the English pastoral elegy, was published in 1637, just one year before Bradstreet wrote her elegy for Sir Philip Sidney.

As Kay notes (and "Lycidas" exemplifies), a key difference between the pastoral and the funeral elegy is the centrality of the poet within the poem. It is this focus on the elegist that allows the existential consolation of the pastoral, and against which Bradstreet's elegies for Sidney and Du Bartas rebel. The very act of writing a pastoral elegy elevates its subject to the realm of fame and positions the elegist as the latest in a line of immortal artists. The consolation of the pastoral elegy is thus grounded in two interdependent substitutions: in the first, the elegist overcomes personal grief by creating a poetic substitute for the dead, one that comforts both by offering images of a poetic or heavenly apotheosis and assures the poet that the elegiac subject will live on in fame. In the second, the elegist addresses existential grief by positioning him- or herself as a replacement for the dead and therefore an inheritor of the literary fame of his or her forebear, a fame ironically justified by the poetic task just completed. As Peter Sacks argues, "the heir apparent must demonstrate a greater strength or proximity to the dead than any rival may claim, but her must also wrest his inheritance *from* the dead" (original italics 37).

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<sup>10</sup> See also William C. Watterson, "Nation and History: The Emergence of the English Pastoral Elegy," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*. 135-152.

Significantly, the replacement that is key to existential consolation has long been considered the territory of male poets. As critics like Paula Backscheider and Celeste Schenck argue, the pastoral elegy has a long tradition as a poem written as a kind of rite of passage for young male poets, serving as “an initiation rite and an announcement to the world of their intent to assume the mantle of the dead” (Backscheider 311). Nathaniel Ward himself must have recognized that Bradstreet had strayed into dangerously unfeminine territory, for he frames the contest between Bradstreet and Du Bartas as a question of “Sex weighed, which best, the woman or the man?” (8). Ultimately, Apollo refuses to answer that question, and Ward contents himself with noting that Bradstreet’s skill is grounded in imitation, that she is “a right Du Bartas girl” (12).

Such an assertion was a common way of conceptualizing women’s poetic production. As Phillip Round explains, “for a woman poet, the assumption of imitation of male sources was already inscribed in the act of writing itself” (175). Round notes that twentieth century critics have begun to trace the aesthetic and social complexities of poems previously dismissed as mere imitations:

though such imitations of male texts are often slighted “as ‘only’ the product[s] of female aesthetic passivity and conservatism,” Patrick Colborn has argued that they in fact comprise a “powerfully intertextual aesthetic” whose mode of “mimetic reinscription” serves as “a complicated gesture of deference and difference.” (175)

In fact, Ward concludes his poem in a way that suggests even Bradstreet’s contemporaries recognized imitation as a powerful poetic tool. He closes his poem with

a warning: “shod by Chaucer’s boots and Homer’s furs/ Let men look to’t lest women wear the spurs” (17-18). Ward’s concluding couplet illustrates how the elegy might be particularly fraught terrain for women poets. For if the existential consolation of the pastoral elegy is based in the elegist’s ability to fill the space left behind by his poet-forebear, then who better to step into empty “boots” and “furs” than those most practiced in imitating the verse of the departed? Blurring the line between imitation and inheritance, Ward’s image of a cross-dressed female poet speaks directly to anxieties surrounding poetic inheritance and tradition, overlooking Du Bartas entirely and making use of the classical allusions typical of pastoral elegy to locate Bradstreet within a tradition of lauded male poets before directing male readers to “look to” the possible effects of imitation, “lest women wear the spurs.”

While Ward’s anxieties direct us to the significance of elegy within the framework of the gendered competition he evokes, his image fails to recognize a key feature of Bradstreet’s elegiac practice: although she clearly engages the consolatory model of inheritance and replacement in her elegies for Sir Philip Sidney and Guillaume Du Bartas (the only elegies Bradstreet wrote in honor of other poets) she does so in order to refuse it, troubling the mechanics through which the pastoral elegy seeks to provide its answer to grief. Bradstreet’s elegies draw our attention to a central fiction of the pastoral: that the intent of such poems is primarily to answer personal grief by honoring the lost subject of the poem. In the close readings that follow, I’ll explore how Bradstreet engages specific conventions of the pastoral elegy to highlight the genre’s emphasis on existential consolation. Even her choice of subjects calls our attention to the ease with

which the pastoral elegy may neglect personal grief to focus on its existential counterpart, for although Bradstreet obviously read and admired the verses of the poets she honors, she could not have felt their deaths as personal blows: Sidney died in 1586 and Du Bartas in 1590, more than twenty years before she was born.<sup>11</sup> In choosing to honor poets whose deaths predate her own birth, Bradstreet removes personal consolation from the equation, pushing her readers to expect the encomia that would justify the elegiac task. Too often read as failed or abandoned attempts at consolation, Bradstreet's poems for Sidney and Du Bartas are as much about the genre of elegy as they are about the poets they mourn, for in them she highlights and rejects the exchange of personal grief for artistic fame and immortality that lies at the heart of pastoral elegiac consolation.

When read as a pair, the poems serve to critique a genre that fails to accommodate female poets. In her poem for Sir Philip Sidney, Bradstreet calls our attention to the ways that the very conventions that provide consolation to male poets exclude female poets from the consolatory model. She revises three conventions that work to provide consolation in the pastoral elegy, deliberately positioning herself within a matrix of fellow elegists, rather than as the chief mourner and logical heir to Sidney's fame, recasting the muses with whom she cannot consort as jealous harpies, and highlighting the artificiality of a humility topos that has been too frequently read, even in the twentieth century, as a sincere profession of inferiority when offered by a woman poet. As she does so, Bradstreet turns the conventions of the elegy against themselves to insist that the

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<sup>11</sup> Spargo identifies "belatedness" as one of the key conventions of the anti-elegy: "Simply put, belatedness signifies an element of noncooperation in the mourner, marking him as someone who is, if only accidentally, out of step with the rhythm of his society and its forgetful flow toward the future" (*Ethics of Mourning* 129).

existential consolation inaccessible to her is one that is made available to male elegists only through the death of the subject they mourn. Near the end of the poem, she presents an alternate possibility for the genre, one that re-centers the poem to focus on the elegized rather than the elegist. She recognizes, however, that her gendered position within the structure of the genre prevents her from altering it, and she ultimately opts out of the elegiac task. In her poem for Guillaume Du Bartas, Bradstreet takes up this alternate possibility, crafting an elegy whose primary focus is to answer a particular loss. Ensuring that her turn to personal consolation is read as a choice, rather than the only available option, she imagines the muse as a child, restructuring the gender dynamics of the poem and ultimately allowing herself access to existential consolation. Yet Bradstreet pointedly refuses to trade her poetic mentor's death for her own comfort, instead integrating elements of the Puritan funeral elegy to prepare readers for a poem whose consolatory mechanics are based on spiritual, rather than artistic, apotheosis and inheritance. Drawing personal consolation from both subgenres but accepting existential consolation from neither, Bradstreet positions Du Bartas as a Christian poet whose skill and virtue are unavailable for appropriation by those who mourn him.

*An Elogie upon that Honorable and renowned Knight, Sir Philip Sidney*

Of the three “worldly” elegies published in *The Tenth Muse*, Bradstreet's poem for Sir Philip Sidney most overtly engages the pastoral elegiac model. It is also, ironically, Bradstreet's most radical elegy. She is attacked by the muses, who drive her “from Parnassus in a rage,” helping themselves to her pen in the process. She manages to



get it back in order to close the poem, but it ends just a few lines later: “So Sidney’s fame, I leave to England’s Rolls./ His bones do lie interr’d in stately Paul’s” (128, 135-136). One assumes these are the lines that prompted Kenneth Requa to write that “because her interpolated self-dramatization, rather than her consideration of Sidney, provides the conclusion, the structure of the poem is flawed; she stops writing but does not complete her tribute” (153). I would argue that Bradstreet’s concluding focus on herself-as-participant is not only an important link between her own poetry and the developing tradition of the pastoral in English, but is also central to her engagement of the pastoral elegy’s exchange of personal grief for artistic fame and immortality. Tracing the way Bradstreet uses this elegy to address and critique the pastoral model of inheritance, competition, and replacement, the ways that even the “conventional” elements of this elegy, such as the invocation of the muses and Bradstreet’s professions of her own unworthiness, work to call attention to the exchanges necessitated by the genre, we find that Bradstreet critiques the pastoral elegiac model by displacing the struggle from one between the elegist and rival poet-successors, or even between the elegist and the dead, onto a gendered struggle between herself and the muses, who come to represent not poetic inspiration but the limits of the pastoral elegy itself for women poets.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This essay builds on the work of Timothy Sweet and Ivy Schweitzer, both of whom find in Bradstreet’s early elegies rebellions against the conventional gender dynamics of the genre. My work is indebted to theirs, but I would suggest that Bradstreet not only calls our attention to the ways that the elegy must be reformed to create a space for a female speaking subject, (an argument which they both present) but that in doing so she enacts a systematic critique of existential consolation that we might trace through her pastoral and funeral elegies. See Sweet, “Gender, Genre, and Subjectivity in Anne Bradstreet’s Early Elegies,” and Schweitzer, “Anne Bradstreet Wrestles with the Renaissance.”

Bradstreet engages the pastoral model fairly early in the poem when she positions herself as the literal heir of Sir Philip Sidney. The Dudleys and the Sidneys were possibly related, and Bradstreet is quick to lay claim her kin. As Sacks notes, in ancient Greece, “the right to mourn was...legally connected to the right to inherit” (37). Bradstreet makes this connection explicit, writing, “Let then, none disallow of these my strains,/Which have the self-same blood yet in my veins” (27-28). While Bradstreet does claim her bloodline as a justification for elegizing, she does not use this reference to secure her position above her fellow mourners. In fact, Bradstreet uses the very line in which she claims kinship with Sidney to tie herself to some of his other elegists, those who in typical pastoral elegy would be represented as competitors. As Nancy Wright notes, Joshua Sylvester also looks to family ties to justify the elegiac task, and in his elegy for Sidney he suggests that the poet might only be adequately mourned by two voices: that of his niece, Lady Mary Wroth, “In whom her Uncle’s noble Veine renews,” and that of Sidney’s own muse (qtd. in Wright 246). After adopting and adapting the former in her claims of blood relation, Bradstreet overtly refers and assents to the latter when she joins “with Sylvester to confess/ But Sidney’s Muse can sing his worthiness” (99-100). In this first rebuke of the pastoral model, Bradstreet also implicitly addresses gender-based objections to her elegy, for her allusion to Wroth also functions as an authorizing stance that, as Wright notes, “imitates a strategy used by preceding women of the Sidney family to position themselves as poets” (246). Yet Sylvester and Wroth are not the only other poets Bradstreet brings into her elegy. In lines 89-90, she adds “Noble

Bartas” to the company. And in line 92, she refers to Sidney as “Astrophel,” alluding to both his own poetic creation and to Spenser’s famous pastoral elegy of the same title.

Instead of positioning herself as superior to other elegists, then, Bradstreet agrees with Sylvester, praises Du Bartas and adopts Spenser’s own epithet for her subject. In fact, Bradstreet chooses her fellow-elegists with care, selecting only poets who share some connection among themselves. It’s entirely possible that in the course of her research for the *Quaternions* Bradstreet read Spenser’s translation of Du Bellay’s “The Ruins of Rome,” which he concludes by comparing Du Bartas to Du Bellay.<sup>13</sup> She alludes to Sylvester’s connection to Wroth by quoting the line that immediately precedes it, and we can assume her readers would know that Sylvester translated Du Bartas into English. Linking each of the elegists she invokes to herself, Sidney, and other elegists in multiple ways, Bradstreet ensures that each adds a voice to the mourning chorus and that none is louder than another. As a counterpoint to this elegiac matrix, we might look to “Astrophel” to see how Spenser manages a similar invocation of other elegists. After bringing other poetic mourners into the poem, he concludes that his will be “[t]he mournfulst verse that ever man heard tell” (8). With this line, Sacks suggests, “Spenser has maneuvered [his fellow] poets, all of whose elegies preceded his in time, into a position of posteriority and dependency. It is he now who leads the mourning, introducing their poems after his” (52). The care with which Bradstreet situates herself within a network of elegists is the first step in her rebuke of the competitive elegiac tradition. Claiming blood ties, she authorizes her own poetic production as she calls into

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<sup>13</sup> I was directed to this passage by E.R. Gregory Jr.’s essay “Du Bartas, Sidney, and Spenser,” which is particularly useful to anyone interested in further research into the relationship between these poets.

question the relationship between her fellow elegists and the subject of their poems, but by refusing the position of primary mourner, she disconnects lament from inheritance, both poetic and familial. Incorporating other elegists not as a supporting chorus but as equally strong voices, she insists that Sidney himself take center stage.

As in her turn to questions of inheritance, Bradstreet begins her engagement with Sidney's fame in a way that evokes and revises pastoral elegiac conventions. Lauding Sidney's military glory, she situates her poem firmly in the classical world even as she locates his fame in a realm that she cannot hope to access. She names each muse, and compares Sidney to Augustus, Caesar, Achilles, Hector, Scipio, Alexander, Hercules, and Mars, allusions she invokes to praise Sidney the soldier, not Sidney the poet (46, 50, 51, 60, 68, 81, 87, 88). In fact, the only classical poet she does include in the poem is Homer, when she writes, "I wish some Homer would/ Engrave on Marble, in characters of Gold,/ What famous feats thou didst, on Flanders coast" (51-53). Of course, Bradstreet herself is happy to provide an account of these deeds. The poem is followed by "His Epitaph," which opens by asking the reader to imagine it not as text on a page, but rather as words carved into stone: "Here lies intomb'd in fame, under this stone,/ Philip and Alexander both in one" (1-2). Yet while Bradstreet is clearly willing to sing the praises of Sidney, by focusing this praise on his martial, rather than artistic accomplishments, she opens the poem with a subject whom she and her fellow elegists might honor without supplanting. While these strategies allow Bradstreet to suspend squabbles over poetic inheritance, she cannot escape the issue entirely. In her critique of the pastoral, Celeste Schenck dramatizes the difficult economics of substitution, arguing that the elegy is "a song sung

over the bier of a friend-forbear in order both to lay the ancestor to rest and to seize the pipes of pastoral poetry from his barely cold hands” (13). It is no mistake that

Bradstreet’s poem ends focused not on Sidney’s legacy, but on “his bones” (136).

Throughout the poem, she highlights the pastoral elegy’s exchange of personal grief for existential consolation by calling our attention again and again to the fact that Sidney’s glory can be shared by his elegists only after he is dead.

The poem begins, of course, with a Sidney not yet “interr’d in stately Paul’s,” for Bradstreet addresses him directly (136). Her careful alternation between second and third person serves to highlight both the elegy’s trade of death for fame and the subsequent abandonment of the elegized. Bradstreet dramatizes Sidney’s death three times in the poem, and each time the shift from second to third person coincides with a turn away from Sidney and to fame. At line 54, Bradstreet shifts her address from Sidney to the city where he fell:

O Zutphon, Zutphon, that most fatal City,  
Made famous by thy fall, much more’s the pity  
Ah, in his blooming prime, death pluckt this Rose  
E’re he was ripe; his thread cut Atropos,  
Thus man was born to die and dead is he. (55-59)

In the first passage in which Bradstreet directly engages the question of fame she insists, both rhetorically and syntactically, that Sidney’s fame may be passed on only with his death. She explicitly states that Zutphon is “made famous by [Sidney’s] fall,” and the shift from second to third person - from Sidney as interlocutor to Sidney as corpse - that

follows this assertion both dramatizes and reinforces the exchange of death for fame that marks pastoral elegy. When the passage continues, Bradstreet resurrects Sidney with a classical allusion typical of the genre, addressing him once more in the second person before again shifting to third person:

Brave Hector by the walls of Troy we see  
Oh, who was near thee, but did sore repine;  
He rescued not with life, that life of thine.  
But yet impartial Death this Boone did give,  
Though Sidney died, his valiant name should live;  
And live it doth, in spite of death, through fame,  
Thus being over-come, he overcame. (59-65)

After this explicit account of the exchange of Sidney's death for fame, Bradstreet turns her attention from the poet to his mourners to show how the fame conferred upon Sidney by death does not remain his own for long. She is not critical of her fellow elegists, but she does take care to mark the transference of Sidney's glory, addressing "Noble Bartas" to say, "this to thy praise adds more/ In sad, sweet verse, thou didst his death deplore" (89-90). Though Bradstreet's praise of Du Bartas may well be sincere, her obvious play with language in these passages – "thus man was born to die and dead is he," "thus being over-come, he overcame," – must stand in stark contrast to the "sad, sweet verse," with which her fellow elegists responded to Sidney's death and claimed a portion of his glory (59, 67, 90). Offering glib answers to the existential anxieties that the elegy is designed

in part to appease, Bradstreet tweaks the conventions of the genre even as she renounces any claim to a reflected portion of her subject's glory.

The third and final time Bradstreet directly addresses Sidney, she finally shifts the basis of her praise from martial to poetic accomplishments. In a particularly deft move, Bradstreet turns from Du Bartas to address Sidney's widow, referring to Lady Sidney as "Stella." She again marks the transfer of fame, but here she works backward – it is not the subject who grants the poet access to immortality, but the poet who provides the subject everlasting fame and beauty, so that even after "thou art gone/...it is record by Philip's hand/ That such an omen once was in our land" (77, 79-80). These lines, finally, speak to the way that pastoral elegy works to address personal loss by cementing the fame of their subject and assuring that he or she will live on in art. Yet as in each of the other passages in which Bradstreet speaks to Sidney, here she quickly turns from praise to competition. Her conflation of Lady Sidney and "Stella" leads to a conflation of "princely Philip" and Astrophel, and Bradstreet resurrects Sidney for the second time only to suggest that Astrophel's fame will outshine his own. While the relationship between Sidney and his poetic creation necessarily differs from that of Du Bartas or Spenser or Sylvester and Sidney, the image of a poet competing with his subject for fame is a striking one, and comes dangerously close to a representation of the ways in which pastoral elegists achieve existential consolation.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Bradstreet recognizes the

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<sup>14</sup> As Ivy Schweitzer points out, the language of this passage is particularly striking in its deployment of gender. Although I disagree with her contention that Bradstreet is making "a bid to become a literary son" to Sidney, her reading of the ways that the allusions and diction of this passage introduce a "disorderly female power" seems indisputable to me. See "Anne Bradstreet Wrestles with the Renaissance" (301).

complexities of these relationships, for after tracing fame from poet to subject to poet-as-subject, she begins to conclude her elegy:

Fain would I shew, how thou fame's path didst tread  
But now into such Lab'rinth I am lead  
With endlesse turnes, the way I find not out  
For to persiste, my muse is more in doubt,  
Calls me ambitious tool, that durst aspire  
Enough for me to look, and so admire (93-98)

I hope that the reading I have offered so far provides a context in which we can read the muse's reproof of Bradstreet not as a confession by the poet of her own unworthiness, but as an indictment of the pastoral elegy's exchange of personal grief for poetic fame. These moments of humility are part of the Renaissance convention of the elegy – indeed, Sylvester's profession that only Sidney's muse may do him justice makes a similar claim (Margerum 154). Yet as Ivy Schweitzer notes, the humility topos necessarily takes on different connotations when employed by a female poet. While Schweitzer suggests that Bradstreet engages this trope as a form of "mimicry," I would argue that her professions of humility serve to highlight the falseness of the convention. What is striking in this instance is the possibility implied by the word "ambition." Even as Bradstreet suggests that she was overambitious in thinking herself worthy to elegize Sidney, she also implies that all such claims to humility are spurious, that all elegists are "ambitious."



Nor is this the only moment in the poem where Bradstreet uses ambiguity to subvert the pastoral elegy's conventional claims to humility. Throughout, she calls our attention to the strangeness of humility as a convention within a poem designed to augment the elegist's own poetic reputation. In fact, the first appearance of the humility topos in the poem coincides with the first use of the word "fame." Here Bradstreet addresses Sidney directly, writing, "But to say truth, thy worth I shall but stain/ Thy fame, and praise, is far beyond my strain" (45-46). Even a casual reader of the poem might take this one with a grain of salt: Bradstreet continues her elegy for another 90 lines. And just as her muse's admonition carries double meaning, Bradstreet's own confession suggests a similar possibility. While the obvious reading of "strain" as a "passage of song or poetry" professes Bradstreet's inability to adequately praise her subject, another meaning of "strain" not uncommon in the seventeenth-century is "utmost capacity or reach" (OED). Her inclusion of the word "fame" suggests that we may then read this line not as a humble admission of Bradstreet's own poetic limitations, but rather a comment on the limitations of a elegy: in tying praise to fame, in linking existential consolation to its personal counterpart, the genre places both beyond the reach of some of its practitioners.

After her muse interrupts and berates her in the "labyrinths" of fame, Bradstreet yet again engages the humility topos, comparing her own verses to Sidney's and finding that they are "in worth, as far short of his due/ As Vulcan is, to Venus native hue" (104-105). This metaphor, which locates Bradstreet in the realm of the classical with Sidney, is particularly telling because it ties the "labyrinths of fame" to questions of sex.

Identifying Sidney with Venus, Bradstreet simultaneously asserts his poetic superiority and its complete lack of relation to gender, thus offering a preemptive rejection of any gender-based objections to her right to elegize him. She continues these cross-gender identifications later in the poem when she deftly redeploys the humility topos in a passage that begins by associating her with Phaeton and ends by linking her poetry not with the muses but to Apollo. A prelude to the confrontation with the muses that is frequently read as a dramatization of Bradstreet's elegiac failure, this passage in fact provides Bradstreet's clearest indictment of the pastoral elegiac model of consolation and its gendered limits. Bradstreet begins by reassuring her readers that she has chosen to elegize Sidney in order to praise him before quickly turning again to the humility topos:

Goodwill did make my head-long pen to run,  
Like unwise Phaeton his ill guided sun,  
Till taught to's cost, for his too hasty hand,  
He left his charge by Phoebus to be man'd (105-108)

In lines that recall her earlier play on "strain," she quickly realigns the comparison she draws between Phaeton and herself to suggest that it is neither poetry nor even elegy itself that she cannot control, but rather the management of Sidney's fame:

So proudly foolish I, with Phaeton strive  
Fame's flaming Chariot for to drive.  
Till terror-struck for my too weighty charge  
I leave it in brief, Apollo do't at large (109-112)

Bradstreet represents her turn to Apollo as a final attempt to access a pastoral model that offers praise without appropriating the subject's fame. Replacing Phaeton rather than Sidney, she represents Apollo as an indulgent father, one who

laughed to patch up what's begun

He bade me drive, and he would hold the Sun.

Better my hap, than was his darling's fate

For dear regard he had of Sidney's state,

Who in his Deity, had so deep share

That those that name his fame, he needs must spare. (113– 118)

Bradstreet thus explicitly frames Apollo's intervention in terms of poetic reputation: she is assured that she can, in fact, drive "fame's chariot," but that she must share that task with Apollo himself. Stipulating that the bright center of the poem, the Sun, be held apart from her, Bradstreet makes it clear that Apollo's allowance is predicated on her focus of praise on Sidney – she is "spared" only because she is willing to make sure that the "fame" of the poem belongs to Sidney alone. For a moment, then, Bradstreet opens the possibility for a new model of the elegy – instead of an "ambitious" poem that looks to appropriate the "fame, and praise" of its subject in the manner of Phaeton stealing his father's carriage, she describes a poem that shares the glory, a poem whose primary purpose is to ease personal grief through an artistic apotheosis of the lost. Sidney can live on, provided there are elegists willing to "name his fame." Yet immediately after proposing this poem, Bradstreet suggests that it cannot exist.

Bradstreet's exchange with Apollo recalls a similar conversation in an elegy written just a year before. In "Lycidas," Milton laments that poetic lives, and fame, are too soon cut short. His moment of existential anxiety is interrupted by Phoebus, who reminds him that death ends the life of a poet, "but not the praise" (76). Phoebus goes on:

*Fame* is no plant that grows on mortal soil,  
Nor in the glistering foil  
Set off to th'world, nor in broad rumor lies,  
But lives and spreads aloft by these pure eyes  
.....  
Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed. (78-81, 84)

In his reading of Milton's elegy, Peter Sacks argues that the turn to Phoebus prefigures the Christian apotheosis of the poem, and engages a larger convention of the pastoral: an alignment with powerful figures of male authority, "a movement that is itself part of the work of mourning" (106). Offering existential comfort by conflating artistic and spiritual apotheosis, Milton's encounter with Phoebus moves him closer to existential consolation. Ultimately, Sacks argues, this meeting leads to the Christian imagery in Milton's poem that reaffirms the elegist's own surviving power, for "we find it hard to avoid the recognition that it is, after all, the poet who has Christ raise Lycidas." (116)

Although Bradstreet's conversation with Apollo, like Milton's with Phoebus, comes at a turning point in the poem, her shift from the muses to the god is neither empowering nor permanent. Because she refuses the position of inheriting son,

Bradstreet's invocation of Apollo empties the convention of meaning. Like Milton, she may create a god within her poem, but because she has him refuse elegiac convention by prioritizing personal over existential consolation, he is ultimately powerless. Less a figure of male authority than a flake who can't keep his word, Bradstreet's Apollo "Promis'd much, but th' muses had not will/ To give to their detractor any quill" (119-121). Instead of an Apollo who replaces the female authorities of the poem, Bradstreet creates one who, crossing them, unceremoniously disappears. Without the ability to confer a portion of the subject's fame to the elegist, Apollo is powerless.

Bradstreet's return to the muses foregrounds the relationship between sex, convention, and the twofold consolation of the pastoral elegy. As Nancy Wright points out, the muses deny Bradstreet access to her pen not because she lacks skill but because she has offended them. Instead of approaching the muses as a supplicant who hopes they will provide her with poetic grace, Bradstreet opens the poem with only Sidney's poetry in her thoughts. In her initial praise of Sidney, she calls out each muse by name, explaining how Sidney surpasses each. She concludes by addressing them directly:

Are not his Tragick Comedies so acted  
As if your nine-fold wit had been compacted;  
To show the world, they never saw before  
That this one volume should exhaust your store (15-18)

Before she aligned herself with Apollo, Bradstreet had already insulted the muses and in their refusal of her, they echo her final line to them:

With high disdain, they said they give no more,

Since Sidney had exhausted all their store (119-123).

Bradstreet is careful to explicitly frame the confrontation in terms of poetic acclaim:

For to revenge his wrong, themselves engage,  
And drove me from Parnassus in a rage,  
Not because sweet Sidney's fame was not dear,  
But I had blemish'd theirs, to make't appear. (127-130)

Although she proposed through Apollo an alternate model of elegy, one that would allow her to praise Sidney without trying to supplant him, the muses refuse her access to it.

Like the pastoral elegist, they want a share in Sidney's fame. Significantly, although they never suggest Bradstreet lacks skill, the muses are doubly offended that their insult comes from a female poet. Before they take Bradstreet's pen, they admit "that this contempt it did the more perplex, /In being done by one of their own sex" (123-124).

Timothy Sweet maintains that Bradstreet uses the figure of the muse to highlight the exclusion of women from the position of speaking subject in poetry (156). He writes:

In Renaissance elegiac discourse, the subjectivity of the poet is produced – the poet enters the poem – as two oppositional relations are set up, one between the poet and the object of the elegy and another between the poet and the muse. In the poetry of this kind that Bradstreet knew, 'The feminine' could only be construed in the sites of muse and object (though the 'object' could also be masculine) but these sites cannot be occupied by the speaking subject. (155)

In her dramatic clash with the muses, Bradstreet calls our attention to these gender dynamics. In place of what Sweet identifies as “a repository of certain ‘ideal’ feminine traits: beauty, grace, pity, harmony with nature, and so on,” Bradstreet offers us a collection of vindictive, screeching harpies (156). What is particularly interesting is how she clearly implicates the genre of elegy, and its preoccupation with poetic fame, with this revision of the gendered positions within the poem and with her own expulsion from Parnassus.

The image of the pen snatched from Bradstreet by the Muses enacts a reversal of the pipes passed from one poet to another. By attempting to align herself with Apollo and honoring Sidney at the cost of the muses, Bradstreet has betrayed them. First she has abandoned the traditional feminine position of “object” and assumed the role of speaking subject, and then she has depleted what little power they have left by focusing her praise on Sidney. In retaliation, they force her into silence. Ultimately, the pen is returned to Bradstreet by Errata, with the permission of the muses, “For to conclude my poem two lines they deign” (134).<sup>15</sup> Yet this is no gift. Bradstreet cannot possibly attempt an elegy in only two lines. Thus, it is appropriate that it is Errata who provides her with her pen, for however Bradstreet tries to close the poem, it must be false.

Far from abandoning Sidney, the last two lines return to him in a final effort to critique the genre she cannot revise. The neglect of actual focus on the elegized, the squabbles over poetic inheritance, and the petty attachment of the muses to their own

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<sup>15</sup> Sweet points out the similarity between Errata & Erato, the muse of erotic poetry: “Thus the name simultaneously identifies a discourse & distances the present production from that discourse, while invalidating the convention.” (160)

fame all conclude with the poem's last two lines. After his thirty-line absence, the final couplet's return to Sidney is shocking in its bluntness: "So Sidney's fame, I leave to England's Rolls, / His bones do lie interred in stately Paul's" (135-136).<sup>16</sup> Like every other reference to fame in the poem except for Apollo's unmistakable decree, the "fame" here is ambiguous: it may belong to Sidney or to his future elegists. In directing them to Sidney's bones, rather than to his poetry, Bradstreet removes herself from the fray she implies will consume them, abandoning neither Sidney nor her poem but the pastoral elegy itself.

We find, therefore, that the much-debated question of whether Bradstreet's elegy for Sidney is a "successful" one depends on the generic framework through which we read it. If, like most critics, we read the poem as a pastoral elegy, it certainly fails. Refusing to lead either poet or reader through grief to consolation, Bradstreet's poem seems to bungle elegiac conventions, evoking them just enough to attract charges of formulaic writing but failing to use them to provide consolation. When read as anti-elegy, however, as a critique of the motivation and organization of the systems of exchange through which the pastoral provides its consolation, we find a poem that questions the morality and efficacy of consolation much as its twentieth-century counterparts do without resorting to an unquestioning attachment to the dead or a

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<sup>16</sup> Paula Kopecz draws our attention to the slant rhyme in this final couplet. Although she identifies it as a "sensuous reminder...of our own mortality," I would suggest that the imperfection here works, like the two other slant rhymes in the poem at lines 51-52 and 77-78 (both arrive in couplets addressing the impermanence of fame), to draw our attention to the inadequacy of the exchange – here Sidney's bones for fame - promoted by traditional pastoral elegy (180).



suggestion that, for the female poet, the only way to resist the “economic problem of mourning” is to refuse consolation entirely.<sup>17</sup>

*In Honour of Du Bartas 1641*

It is no mistake that in staging the contest for poetic supremacy at the beginning of *The Tenth Muse*, Nathaniel Ward chooses Du Bartas rather than Bradstreet’s kinsman Sidney for her competition. Of the nine friends of Woodbridge who contributed to the prefatory poems, Ward was not the only one to compare Bradstreet to her poetic idol.

H.S. offers us the following anagram:

Anna Bradstreate      Dear neat An Bartas

So Bartas like thy fine spun poems been,

That Bartas’ name will prove an epicene.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In the second edition of her work, Bradstreet’s elegy for Sidney includes some notable changes. Most significant to my reading are the large cuts to the section on Stella and the excision of her encounter with Apollo. While such changes may seem to soften Bradstreet’s overall critique of the pastoral tradition, they have the effect of clarifying the connection between the rival-elegists and Bradstreet’s inability to find her way through the “labyrinth of fame.” In the 1650 edition, Bradstreet moves from her fellow elegists to Sidney’s own creation to the “labyrinth of fame” (where she is chided by the muses) to Apollo’s chariot to Parnassus, where she is set upon by the jealous nine. In the 1678 version, this journey is streamlined so that what took 42 lines in the original poem is now accomplished in twelve: we get Du Bartas in line 64, “Astrophel” in line 69, the “labyrinth of fame” in line 71, Sylvester in line 74, and the attack of the muses two lines later. That such changes offer a clearer critique of the pastoral’s focus on poetic inheritance is similarly suggested by another slight, but incredibly important alteration: in what is now line 43, Bradstreet changes the nature of the blood that “runs within [her] veins.” No longer representing herself as Sidney’s heir, she describes her elegiac task as an “English” privilege, an opportunity she now refuses even more directly in the poem’s unaltered conclusion when she leaves Sidney’s fame – and his bones – to “England’s rolls” (91-92).

<sup>18</sup> As this poem indicates, the gender anxiety attending Bradstreet’s poetry was not limited to Ward. Ivy Schweitzer notes that by referring to Du Bartas as an “epicene,” the author (probably Henry Stubbe the younger [Round 193]) chose a word “from Latin grammar applied to nouns that, without changing their grammatical gender, may demote either sex. It was also used in the seventeenth century ‘humorously’ (one may read here also ‘demeaningly’) to describe persons, their employments, characters, etc. partaking of the characteristics of both sexes. It is linked in the examples from 1604, 1633, and 1661 with ‘effeminate,’ ‘hermaphroditic,’ and ‘bastard.’” (“Renaissance” 294).

We know that Sylvester's 1621 translation, *Dubartas, His Divine Weekes and Workes, with a compleat Collection of all the other most delight-full Workes* influenced Bradstreet's *Quaternions*, as well as some of her later poems.<sup>19</sup> Bradstreet herself acknowledges the similarities between her poetry and that of the author of *Semaines*. In the opening poem of *The Tenth Muse*, "To her most Honoured Father Thomas Dudley Esq. these humbly presented," she writes, "I feared you'd judge Du Bartas was my friend/ I honour him, but dare not wear his wealth" (36-38). She mentions Du Bartas again in the second poem of the book, and again in terms of her poetic admiration:

But when my wond'ring eyes and envious heart  
Great Bartas' sugared lines do but read o'er  
Fool I do grudge the Muses did not part  
'Twixt him and me that overfluent store.  
A Bartas can do what a Bartas will,  
But simple I, according to my skill. (9-14)

While Bradstreet praises Sidney's poems within his elegy, her admiration for him is apparent nowhere else in *The Tenth Muse*. In fact, even as she lauds Sidney's martial exploits unequivocally, her assessment of his poetry is tinged with critique: addressing Sidney directly, Bradstreet describes herself as one "[w]ho honors thee for what was honorable/ But leaves the rest as most unprofitable" (29-30). And though Bradstreet refuses to accept reflected fame from Sidney's death, by the end of that poem she resigns herself to leaving his bones for the poets to pick. Du Bartas, however, meets a happier

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<sup>19</sup> For a useful study of the influence of Du Bartas in Bradstreet's "Contemplations," see Kenneth Requa's "Anne Bradstreet's Use of Du Bartas in 'Contemplations.'"

fate. In her elegy for him, Bradstreet writes the poem of praise proposed but unattempted in the elegy for Sidney.

In the second of her “worldly” elegies, Bradstreet is again faced with a genre whose conventions have developed to provide interlocked personal and existential consolation to its male practitioners. Seeking to write a poem for Du Bartas in the model of the Apollonian poem limned in the elegy for Sidney, Bradstreet draws on a second strain of elegy – the Puritan funeral elegy – in order to disconnect personal from existential consolation. Although Bradstreet accepts in her elegy for Du Bartas the personal consolation provided by the pastoral – that the beloved dead will live on through art – she rewrites key conventions of the genre in order to trouble the mechanisms through the elegy addresses existential grief. Doubly revising the figure of the muse, Bradstreet suggests that Du Bartas’s poetic skill is a gift, and therefore property, of a Christian god. In doing so, she refuses the inheritance and replacement at the heart of the pastoral elegy’s consolatory model. This turn, however, suggests that the poem may take a different route to existential consolation, that Du Bartas’s mourners may comfort themselves by imagining a spiritual apotheosis, and find in the Christian poet’s implied heavenly immortality an answer to their own existential grief. To guard against such uses of the dead, Bradstreet proposes and ultimately refuses the consolatory model of the Puritan funeral elegy, which suggests that the elegist may follow the spiritual model of the beloved departed and, imitating his saintly virtues, follow him to heaven. Opening the possibility for such heavenly reward in her critique and revision of key conventions of the pastoral, she implies that her elegy may provide a space in which she may demonstrate

her own goodness and submission to the will of god. However, although Bradstreet creates a space in which she may address her own existential anxieties, she refuses to inhabit it. By focusing on Du Bartas's artistic accomplishments rather than his imitable spiritual virtues, she represents his death as an opportunity for praise rather than a demonstration of her own righteousness. In her elegy for Du Bartas, Bradstreet weaves together the pastoral and the Puritan funeral elegy, ultimately accepting the existential consolation of neither. Instead, she creates an elegy that serves to honor her poetic forebear and speaks to his loss by assuring both elegist and readers of his artistic immortality while refusing to address their own artistic or spiritual fates.

My reading of Bradstreet's elegy for Du Bartas begins by tracing her continued critique of the gendered conventions through which the pastoral elegy proposes a tradition of poetic inheritance and replacement in order to calm the existential fears of its practitioners. In her explicit engagement of the justification of elegy, her rewriting of the figure of the muse, and her refusals of artistic fame, Bradstreet extends the critique of the pastoral elegy begun in her poem for Sidney. In that poem, while Bradstreet refused to participate in the exchange of personal for existential consolation, she could not prevent other poets from doing so. In this poem, I argue, Bradstreet dismantles the mechanics of a consolatory model based on inheritance and replacement by framing Du Bartas's skill as the gift of a Christian god. Returning to her elegiac justification and her revision of the muse, I'll explore the way that Bradstreet's critique of the pastoral actually opens the possibility of the spiritual, existential consolation that marks the Puritan funeral elegy. Finally, I'll show how Bradstreet refuses such consolation, redirecting her praise to Du

Bartas's poetic accomplishments so as to offer him the artistic apotheosis of the pastoral without engaging the existential consolation of either it or the Puritan funeral elegy.

Bradstreet begins her critique of the pastoral model almost with the poem itself, for she is quick to assert her reasons for writing. She notes that this is her second attempt to elegize Du Bartas, and that

My dazzled sight of late renew'd thy lines,  
Where art and more than art in nature shines;  
Reflection from their beaming altitude  
Did thaw my frozen heart's ingratitude. (6-10)

Claiming her right to elegize not in terms of bloodlines, as in her elegy for Sidney, but in terms of emotional compulsion, Bradstreet calls into question the motivation of the pastoral elegy. Continuing the metaphor, she again invites her fellow-elegists into the poem, suggesting that hers is not the only elegy called forth by the "light" of Du Bartas's verse, "Which rays, darting upon some richer ground,/ Had caused flowers, and fruits, soon to abound" (11-12). Bradstreet's extended exploration of the motivation behind elegy strengthens her critique of the pastoral. Vegetation imagery is a staple of the genre, one frequently used to facilitate the poem's exchange of personal grief for existential consolation. Sacks suggests that such images allow the elegist to incorporate personal loss into a larger schema of seasonal growth and death, so that "the unique death is absorbed into a natural cycle of repeated occasions, and the very expression of mourning is naturalized as though it too were a seasonal event" (24). While such figurations speak initially to personal losses, they are eventually put into service of the elegist's own

existential anxieties. Sacks goes on to argue that “the immortality suggested by nature’s self-regenerative power rests on a principle of recurrent fertility,” one whose operations might console the elegist who now inherits the potency, both sexual and poetic, of his poet-forebear (27). “Lycidas,” for example, opens with his address to the laurels, myrtles, and ivy that he will gather:

And with forc'd fingers rude,  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.  
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,  
Compels me to disturb your season due:  
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime (4-8)

Sacks reads such images as evocations of castration that are key to the existential consolation of these poems, arguing that “a bitter shattering and plucking of leaves and berries ‘harsh and crude’ is not unlike the compulsion to an act of symbolic castration” (96). In calling forth flowers rather than reaping them, Bradstreet’s image works against the sexual impulse Sacks identifies. While her metaphor might be read as a reworking of these conventions so as to allow a transference of poetic power without an absolute replacement, her characterization of her own elegy: “But barren I, my daisy here do bring/ A homely flower in this my latter spring” works against such a reading (13-14). In gendered language, Bradstreet refuses to accept the potency – either poetic and sexual – that affords existential consolation within the pastoral elegy. Explicitly framing her production as singular, rather than seasonal, she adapts the humility topos to insist that

her poem may function to honor Du Bartas without participating in the pastoral economy of consolation.

She continues her revision and refusal of pastoral conventions designed to facilitate inheritance and replacement when she returns to the figure that so troubled her elegy for Sidney: that of the muse. In place of the nine named in the previous poem, Bradstreet here presents a muse that,

unto a Child, [she] fitly may compare.

Who sees the riches of some famous Fayre;

Who feeds his eyes but understanding lacks;

To comprehend the worth of all those knacks. (19-22)

If the muses of the previous poem were unwilling to cede any of their glory to the subject of the elegy, she will create a muse who may. He soon reveals, however, that he also wants a part of his subject's skill and fame, "and thousand times his mazed mind doth wish/ Some part, at least, of that brave wealth was his" (24-25). Like the classical muses of the earlier poem, this new creation is caught in the "labyrinth of fame." But he is a creature of Bradstreet's own making and she curbs his ambition while paying homage to Du Bartas. Because the young muse cannot adequately describe the glories of Du Bartas' poetry, "feeling utterance fail his great desires;/ [he] Sits down in silence, deeply he admires" (33-34). Thus, as Timothy Sweet notes, Bradstreet forces her muse into the position which the jealous muses of Sidney's elegy propose for her: "to look, and so admire" ("Sidney" 97). Imagining her muse as a male child is a key intervention in the genre that allows Bradstreet to write an elegy that praises her subject without

appropriating his poetic skill or spiritual virtue. Her creation of a muse of the opposite sex forestalls the competition that led the muses to attack her in the previous poem. As Sweet argues, if the traditional repository for the feminine in poetry is in “the sites of muse and object,” and “these sites cannot be occupied by the speaking subject,” then Bradstreet’s explicit muting of her male muse opens a space in the poem for a speaking female subject (155).<sup>20</sup> Figuring herself as mother to the “silly Prattler,” Bradstreet extends the rebuke of the relationship between poetic inheritance and sexual congress she began in her justification for elegizing. While these engagements highlight Bradstreet’s own awareness of the mechanics and limits of the elegy’s consolatory power, however, they cannot create a different fate for Du Bartas than for the subject of her earlier elegy. Bradstreet may opt out of the elegizing task, but this will not protect him from other poets who offer their own poetic production as evidence that they have inherited the poetic power of the elegiac subject.

In order to do so, Bradstreet repeatedly insists that Du Bartas’s poetic skill is a gift, and therefore property, of god. He has, she says, a “saint-like mind” (38). Even as she grants that Du Bartas is afforded “immortal bays,” she also insists that his gifts come from “the hand of heaven” (64, 67). Offering Du Bartas a Christian god as his muse, Bradstreet further rebukes the fame-hungry muses and elegists of Sidney’s poem even as she protects Du Bartas from those who might wish to claim a share of his glory.

Engaging the humility topos characteristic of both Puritan funeral and pastoral elegy, in

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<sup>20</sup> Sweet also reads the coding of muse as child as a deconstruction of the traditional sexual relationship between poet and muse. In this revised vision, he argues, Bradstreet makes it clear that “the gender and the sexuality of the muse are only represented, never ‘natural.’” (163).



this poem she echoes earlier her assertion that only “Sidney’s muse can sing his worthiness” when she suggests that she might break through the silence of her grief only if she had “an Angel’s voice or Barta’s pen” (“Sidney” 100, “Du Bartas” 51-52). Though the poem ends with a couplet that recalls the last two lines of her elegy for Sidney, Bradstreet closes with this address to her elegized: “I’ll leave thy praise to those shall do thee right, / Good will, not skill, did bring me to my mite” (84-85). In these final lines, Bradstreet addresses Du Bartas instead of her reader or her fellow elegists. Thus, while Sidney is reduced to “bones” at the end of his elegy, an object whose “praise, and fame,” is available for appropriation, at the end of his poem Du Bartas is still an intact subject, one whose “praise” alone is left to those who will “do [him] right.” In thus limiting the access to Du Bartas, Bradstreet is able to praise his other elegists without encouraging the kind of exchange of death for fame we find in the Sidney elegy. Even so, she goes to some lengths to argue that such a competition would be useless since Du Bartas cannot be replaced. In fact, she explicitly engages the pastoral model of inheritance and replacement near the end of the poem. Du Bartas’s “haughty style, [and] rapted wit sublime,” she argues, “all ages wondering at, shall never climb” (75-76).

Praising Du Bartas’s poetic skill but framing that skill as a gift, and therefore property, of god, Bradstreet accepts the personal consolation of the pastoral elegy – that the lost will live on in artistic fame – while locating his skill and fame outside of the “strain” of her fellow elegists. In her turn to a Christian muse, however, Bradstreet opens a second possible path to existential consolation, one that the poem engages in each of its critiques of the pastoral model, but which she never accepts. In fact, we find Bradstreet

gesturing toward the Puritan funeral elegy's consolatory model very early in the poem – even as she offers the justification for elegizing in which she critiques the pastoral, she also and frames this poem as an exercise in moral self-improvement. Though she does not directly engage the Christian nature of Du Bartas's verse, she does include the tantalizing suggestion that, in his poems “more than art in nature shines,” and her claim that Du Bartas's poems “thaw [her] frozen heart's ingratitude” presents the poems themselves as a call to moral self-improvement, a call that may be answered through the writing of the elegy at hand (9, 11). The vegetation imagery that follows functions similarly: though it serves as a rebuke to the consolatory mechanics of the pastoral, it does nothing to suggest that Bradstreet might not follow Du Bartas's spiritual example and thus calm her existential fears through anticipation of heavenly reward. In fact, her deployment of the humility topos in that instance may situate her more advantageously than her fellow-elegists, for it suggests that Bradstreet's primary elegiac concern is primarily moral or spiritual, rather than artistic. Of course, Bradstreet does ultimately refuse to limn the paths necessary to attain such existential consolation. Before she does so, however, she again asserts the option that she may accept it, offering a revised figure of the muse that serves to critique the exchange of death for fame which affords existential consolation within the pastoral even as it opens the possibility for the demonstration of moral rectitude and spiritual guidance that allows for existential consolation within the Puritan funeral elegy.

As in her earlier revision of pastoral engagements with sexuality, Bradstreet's revision of the figure of the muse offers an opportunity for her to demonstrate the moral

goodness that might facilitate spiritual, existential consolation. Representing herself as a mother, Bradstreet assumes one of the few positions from which a woman might offer moral instruction. And in quieting her fame-obsessed muse, she seems to offer evidence of the self-improvement that she implies in her justification for elegizing. Yet while Bradstreet's revision of the pastoral convention of the muse opens the possibility that she may step in to guide him in the same way Du Bartas may guide her, she does not enter this poem as a character in the same way she does her elegy for Sidney. Bradstreet enacts her authority as poet rather than as mother, and while she does shut down the muse's "prattle," she does so by letting him wear himself out.

In fact, it is in her engagement with the muse that Bradstreet first suggests that this poem will not follow the path to existential consolation provided by the Puritan funeral elegy. Indulging the child muse's "silly" admiration, Bradstreet realigns her elegy with the pastoral model, which lauds the poetic skill of the mourned subject rather than his spiritual virtue. The muse that Bradstreet creates does not speak to the Christian nature of Du Bartas's verse, instead admiring artistic accomplishments that Bradstreet metaphorizes as "the riches of some famous fair": "The glittering Plate, and Jewels, he admires,/ The Hats, and Fans, the Plumes, and Ladies tires" (24-25). While Bradstreet admits that such admiration is based only on the surface of Du Bartas's work, while she recognizes that her muse "feeds his eyes, but understanding lacks," her own praise of Du Bartas's work is similarly focused on his artistic, rather than Christian, accomplishments (22). In fact, Bradstreet's own language redirects us to Du Bartas's poetic skill. Eschewing of the plain style typical of Puritan funeral elegy, Bradstreet here maintains

that her “ravisht eyes, and heart, with faltering tongue/ In humble wise have vow’d their service long” (2-3). Indeed, Du Bartas’s poetry is so powerful that, in a passage that again highlights the falseness of the humility topos, Bradstreet describes the effects of his verse in devotional language nearly as mellifluous as his own:

A thousand thousand times my senseless Senses  
Moveless, stand charmed by thy sweet influences,  
More senseless than the stones to Ampion’s lute  
Mine eyes are sightless and my tongue is mute. (45-48)

Although she has restructured the gendered conventions of pastoral elegy to offer the possibility that her elegy for Du Bartas may provide a space for her to exercise the spiritual guidance that evidences submission to god’s will, Bradstreet never steps into the space that she opens. In these lines we find none of the self-rebuke that redirects her mourning in “Verses Upon the Burning of Our House.” Though she admits that her muse does not understand the value of Du Bartas’s verse, she characterizes the objects he admires as “brave wealth” even as she implies that they are baubles. The specific gender coding here – the description of poetic artistry in terms both feminine and material – offers a simultaneous rebuke of the gendered limits of pastoral and a perfect opportunity for Bradstreet to step in and chide her muse, to offer the consolatory assurance we find in “Verses Upon the Burning of Our House,” that although on earth “all’s vanity,” there is a heavenly reward awaiting those who recognize this fact. Neglecting to voice such corrections and focusing her praise of Du Bartas on his earthly accomplishments, rather than his spiritual virtues, Bradstreet works to honor her elegiac subject without using his

death an opportunity. Even when she engages the encomium, a space traditionally reserved in Puritan funeral elegy for an enumeration of the imitable saintly qualities of the departed, Bradstreet only obliquely references the Christian nature of Du Bartas's verse. When she does, she again couches her praise in terms of artistic accomplishment and earthly effects, suggesting that Du Bartas's poetry spoke not to the hearts or souls of his readers but instead led "millions chained by eyes, by ears, by tongues" (66).

Instead of representing Du Bartas as a departed saint who might calm her existential grief by demonstrating the path to heaven or offering her an opportunity to recognize the ephemerality of earthly beauty, Bradstreet insists upon the value of that beauty, relying on the pastoral elegy's artistic apotheosis as a stay against personal grief. Her poem does confer upon Du Bartas the poetic immortality characteristic of the genre; near the end of the poem she tells us that his "fame shall last while stars do stand/ And whilst there's air or fire or sea or land" (79-80). Yet by adopting elements of the Puritan funeral elegy, she neatly sidesteps the existential consolation toward which this fame might be used in the pastoral. Even if she wished to, she could never share Du Bartas's fame - it is the result of his gifts, bestowed by god alone. In this doubled eschewal of existential consolation, Bradstreet is able to write a poem that works to laud the dead without exchanging him for existential comfort. Having offered her praise, she then moves on, leaving Du Bartas to others who "shall do [him] right" (83).

Given Bradstreet's commitment to personal consolation and her refusal to attack the dead in these poems, it's understandable that they have most frequently been read as consolatory pastoral elegies. Certainly the insistence on personal consolation that marks

her elegy for Du Bartas as well as her later, family elegies resists an anti-elegiac reading. In the following chapter, I'll turn to Bradstreet's more personal, family elegies to show how the limits of consolation she traces in the pastoral appear, in different configurations but with no less force, in the Puritan funeral elegy. Reading these two sets of poems as conversant with one another, we find not two Anne Bradstreets, the one staid and formulaic, the other personal and sincere, but rather one poet who produced a collection of mourning literature that, regardless of its subject or its tone, tests and reconfigures elegiac codes, questions the motivation of consolation, and refuses to trade on the dead.

## *Chapter Two*

### **Say He's Merciful: Bradstreet's Puritan Funeral Elegies**

In the twenty-two years between the publication of *The Tenth Muse* and her death in 1676, Bradstreet continued writing. She began work on a second edition, which would include revisions of poems first published in *The Tenth Muse* as well as several additions: her elegies for her mother and father, the religious verses “The Flesh and the Spirit” and “Contemplations,” and a new introductory poem, “The Author to her Book,” clearly intended as an answer to any criticism of *The Tenth Muse*. Not surprisingly, given the complicated relationship with the muses that Bradstreet demonstrates in her early “worldly” elegies, this new collection also dropped the phrase “The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America” from the title. Even as she revised and wrote poems for this edition, Bradstreet continued producing meditative poems that she did not intend to publish, as well as a number of occasional poems, many of them elegies. When her granddaughter Elizabeth died in 1665, Bradstreet wrote the first of her “private” family elegies to mourn her. In what must have been a severe test of her faith, Bradstreet lost two grandchildren and her daughter-in-law in the fall of 1669. She elegized them all.

These elegies were also included in the second edition of her poetry, published in Boston in 1678. Two years after her death, the editor of *Several Poems*, most likely her nephew-in-law John Rogers, prepared an edition that closed with a number of poems he had chosen, “made by the Author upon Divers Occasions, [which] were found among her Papers after her Death, which she never meant should come to publick view” (Bradstreet 1678).<sup>21</sup> The “funeral elegies” for her grandchildren and daughter-in-law are the last of Bradstreet’s poems in the second edition, and they are set apart from the public “Elegyes and Epitaphs” for Sidney, Du Bartas, Queen Elizabeth, and Dorothy and Thomas Dudley.

### *I. Argument Enough: Bradstreet and the Puritan Funeral Elegy*

In the last of the three “worldly” elegies published in both editions, Bradstreet attempts the ultimate “English” elegy: “In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth, of Most Happy Memory.” There have been many productive readings of Bradstreet’s elegy for Queen Elizabeth as both an attempt to reclaim Bradstreet’s own lost “Englishness” and as an eloquent call for women’s equality, a return to the esteem in which women were held during the Elizabethan era. But when read in light of Bradstreet’s earlier critiques of the elegy, we must ask ourselves what kind of interventions in the genre take place in this, the first extant American elegy in which a woman is both mourned and mourner. We’ve traced the ways that Bradstreet tests and troubles the relationship between gender and existential consolation in the pastoral elegy in her poem for Sidney and the way she engages but refuses the existential consolation of

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of reasons why Rogers was most probably the editor, see Jeanine Hensley’s helpful article “The Editor of Ann Bradstreet’s *Several Poems*.”



Puritan funeral elegy in her elegy for Du Bartas. I would argue that Bradstreet's elegy for Queen Elizabeth offers us a way to examine the gendered dynamics of the Puritan funeral elegy, raising questions about the Puritan funeral elegy's adequacy for addressing loss when a woman is placed in the center of the poem, and setting the stage for her later family elegies. By reading Bradstreet's elegy for Queen Elizabeth as a critique, rather than mere refusal, of the Puritan funeral elegy's management of consolation, we gain insight into why her family elegies, like her early pastoral elegies, resist the conventional trade of personal grief for existential consolation. I'll begin by looking at the gendered mechanics of consolation in the Puritan funeral elegy. Then I'll show how Bradstreet's elegy for Queen Elizabeth highlights the limited options available for personal consolation when women are both the writers and the subjects of elegy. Finally, I'll show how, in her elegies for her grandchildren and daughter-in-law, Bradstreet questions not only the possibility but even the desirability of existential consolation, presenting submission to God's will as an increasingly unsatisfying answer to personal grief.

To understand why Bradstreet would question the Puritan funeral elegy's capacity for consolation, we must first examine more closely the ways the genre works to facilitate personal and existential consolation, and the ways it limits potential consolation for female elegists. As we shall see, the mechanics of existential consolation are more complex in the Puritan funeral elegy than in its pastoral counterpart. However, the questions of inheritance and fame at play in the pastoral are not entirely abandoned in these poems. Although, as Hammond notes, the Puritan funeral elegy does not rely on the same mechanics of competition and replacement that characterize the pastoral, poems

celebrating the accomplishments, and bemoaning the loss, of male saints did frequently position the elegist as one who might stand in a newly created gap. Though the fame at stake in these elegies is local and spiritual rather than artistic, the act of elegizing still provides a degree of existential comfort. The elegy Cotton Mather penned for Urian Oakes when the latter died in 1682 provides an example:

*Cotton Embalms great Hooker; Norton Him:*

*And Norton's Hearse do's Poet-Wilson trim*

*With Verses: Mitchel writes a poem on*

*The Death of Wilson; And when Mitchel's gone,*

*Shepard with fun'ral Lamentations gives*

*Honour to Him; and at his Death receives*

*The like from the (like-Marro) Lofty Strain*

*Of Admirable Oakes! I should be vain*

*To thrust into that gallant Chorus ([original italics] qtd. in Cavitch 35)*

In such elegies, as Max Cavitch notes, “[s]uccession and potency are overtly and continuously at stake” (35). Reinforcing the patriarchal values of a community established and protected by “gapsmen,” the Puritan funeral elegy, like its pastoral counterpart, facilitates inheritance. For female elegists in Puritan culture, of course, the genre could serve no such purpose. The trial, and subsequent expulsion, of Anne Hutchinson in 1637 would provide evidence enough of the very real consequences when

women overstepped the prescribed bounds of their religious authority.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in her elegy for her father, a governor and one of the church leaders who tried Hutchinson, Bradstreet indicates that she is aware that she is encroaching on male territory. She justifies her elegiac task with increasing defensiveness, asking

who more cause to boast his worth than I?

Who heard or saw, observed or knew him better?

Or who alive than I a greater debtor? (12-14)

Ultimately, almost defiantly, she concludes, “Let malice bite and envy gnaw its fill, / He was my father, and I’ll praise him still” (15-16). Bradstreet, of course, may feel free to praise her father, but she’ll never be able to inherit the kind of spiritual and civic importance that he held. In fact, many of the same attitudes that restricted women’s participation in the church in early America also limited their options within the elegy. As Phillip H. Round notes, “Within each and every social sphere, early modern women were routinely victimized by men’s view of them as strange hybrid creatures in which the civil and the natural mingled in uneasy alliance” (116).

We can find evidence of this association of women with the uncontrolled “natural” world in Andreas Hyperius’s 1577 treatise *The Practice of Preaching*: “All [that] be of a sound judgement, doe think it very uncomely and womannishe to lament without measure, & to take so impaciently the chaunce that happeneth” (qtd. in

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<sup>22</sup> For a useful account of the anxiety surrounding women’s discourse in early America, see Phillip H. Round’s chapter “They Must Use Their Eares and Not Their Tongues” in *By Nature and By Custom Cursed* 106-152.

Breitwieser *Defense of Mourning* 59). Indeed, as Mitchell Breitwieser notes in his analysis of Hyperius's passage,

A manly constancy or Christian stoicism *measures* grief, that is, confines or delimits grief to a defined interval and a well-bounded area in the terrain of resolve, and the act of delimiting implies the capacity to do so ...this ability to measure mourning, rather than the simple absence of mourning, constitutes manliness. (59)

For a male elegist, then, the Puritan funeral elegy offers a poetic space in which to “measure mourning,” to demonstrate personal grief before restraining it and redirecting it in service of existential consolation. For female elegists, however, turns to lamentation are always in danger of being read as the confirmation of a sinful attachment to earthly bonds, a resistance to the will of God. It is no mistake that when Anne Hutchinson was tried by the church fathers in 1637, the text chosen for her censure was 1 Cor. 5:12: “We are not to hear what naturall affection shall say, for we are to forsake Father and Mother, Wife and Children for Christ Jesus” (Round 138).<sup>23</sup> Thus, while Urian Oakes may begin

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<sup>23</sup> One oft-quoted early criticism of women's mourning and elegy is Urian Oakes's assertion, in his elegy for Thomas Shepard, that, “We need no *Mourning Womens* Elegy.” What critics often fail to note, however, is that Oakes associates these “mourning women” with the pastoral tradition more generally. Explaining why he lacks “The sprightli'est Efforts of Poetic Rage/ To vent my griefs, make others feel my pain,” (8-9) he says:

Ah! Wit avails not, when th'Heart's like to break,  
Great griefs are Tongue ti'ed, when the lesser speak.

Away loose rein'd Careers of Poetry,  
The celebrated Sisters may be gone;  
We need no *Mourning Women's* Elegy,  
No forc'd, affected, artificial Tone. (23-28)

Thus, the “Mourning Women” here are most properly read not as elegists but as muses, the “celebrated Sisters” who provide the “forc'd, affected, artificial” pastoral elegy (qtd. in Cavitch 56). In Oakes's

an elegy for the Reverend Thomas Shepard by framing the poem as an opportunity to “paint our griefs” and “limn out our sorrow,” and then devote the space of twelve stanzas to “moan our loss,” Bradstreet opens her elegy for her father by explaining that she is “By duty bound and not by custom led/ To celebrate the praises of the dead” (“Shepard” 5, 6, 77, “Dudley,” 1).<sup>24</sup> But if the options for consolation were limited for female elegists, they were doubly limited when the elegized was anyone other than an esteemed male saint. In fact, I would argue that the very processes through which consolation is achieved differ depending on whether or not the elegized is a male saint.

In Puritan funeral elegy, personal grief is addressed through didactic assertions as well as poetic processes. While the pastoral may address personal grief by offering the poet a series of conventions that he engages to distance himself from the lost subject even as he works to establish the subject’s fame, the personal consolation of the Puritan funeral elegy begins with straightforward arguments against mourning. Generally, these arguments take two forms. The first reminds readers that the dead are better off. Frequently, mourners are presented with images of the dead content in heaven and awaiting them there. They are reminded that such visions are better met with joy than tears, for the departed saint is now a victor over death. The second argument against personal grief suggests that an indulgence of such grief is an affront to god. Mourners are reminded of the temporary nature of earthly bonds and the sinfulness of resisting

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criticism, we find evidence again of Sweet’s assertion that, within the pastoral, the positions available to women are limited to those of object or muse.

<sup>24</sup> Bradstreet does mention her own grief in her poem for her father. In line 3, she describes her “mournful mind, sore pressed, in trembling verse.” The “lament” of the final line of the epitaph shows just how careful she is to avoid overindulgence with grief: “And when his time with years was spent/ If some rejoiced, more did lament” (84-85). Bradstreet’s poem for her mother makes no mention of grief.

god's plan. The dead, they are assured, belong to the lord, and were only lent to those they've left behind.

It is this second assertion that facilitates the existential consolation of the Puritan funeral elegy. As Jeffrey Hammond explains, the Puritan funeral elegy allows the mourner to address his or her own fears of death by providing poet and readers an opportunity to redirect their personal grief toward existential consolation:

To mourn in the "natural" manner, as Paul had confirmed, was to mourn as if there had been no Resurrection and the deceased were not enjoying its fruits...By stressing the saint's celestial glorification, elegists attempted to move survivors...[toward] "spiritual mourning," the sanctifying grief for sin within the self. Remorse for sin was, in the Puritan view, the only form of grieving that did any good, the only grief that saved. (90, 91)

The dead are not merely waiting in heaven, but beckoning to their survivors, and the elegy provides a means through which mourners can reach them there. Thus, just as the pastoral allows an elegist the chance to offer proof of the elegiac subject's artistic immortality even as he or she demonstrates the means by which he or she will join the elegized in artistic fame, the Puritan funeral elegy offers its readers an opportunity to catalogue the saintly virtues of the dead even as they develop their own.

But while elegies for men and women often feature similar moves toward personal and existential consolation, the relationship between these two types of consolation is drastically different depending on whether the lost saint is male or female. As I will show, for male saints, the relationship between personal and existential

consolation is codependent at least, and generally the existential consolation works in service of personal consolation. The turn to “spiritual mourning” is provoked by this particular loss, which the elegy codes as evidence of the sins of the mourners. By imitating the spiritual virtues of the lost saint and demonstrating their ability to submit to the will of god in the face of this overwhelming loss, mourners are able to begin to atone for the sins that provoked it. For female saints, the relationship between personal and existential consolation is reversed. Their deaths serve as *memento mori*, reminding mourners that they too must die. Mourners can increase their chances of eternal life by following the example of the departed and by submitting to the will of god, but such turns to existential consolation do little to address the original loss. In short, the loss of a male saint requires earthly action, while the loss of a female saint presents spiritual opportunity.

To better understand how the existential turn works to address personal grief in elegies for male saints, we might look to John Fiske’s elegy for Bradstreet’s pastor John Cotton. Fiske concludes a description of his own grief by shifting the object of his mourning from Cotton to those who will not heed his words. After lamenting, “woe to us, so great a Breach when was,” he continues a few lines later:

Woe them whose wayes unrighteous survive

Woe they that by him warning did not take

Woe to us all if mercy us forsake. (72,77-79)

For spiritual leaders like Cotton, personal grief may thus be addressed through spiritual grief, which should be neither borne nor lamented but must be acted upon by following

the saintly example of the dead. The recognition of loss and the grief that attends it as symptoms of, and punishment for, their own sins offers elegists a resolution to personal grief.

In Fiske's lament for "us all," we find an example of how the interdependent consolations provided by the genre will become particularly problematic when American women become the subjects of these elegies. To better understand why I suggest that this difficulty is necessarily tied to both location and gender, we should begin by looking at the difference between English funeral elegies and their American counterparts. The shift from personal grief to a contemplation of sin is not unique to American Puritan funeral elegy; indeed, we may find an example of it in Sylvester's elegy for Sidney, when Sylvester interrupts his praise for his predecessor to remind himself that death is always both God's will and man's fault: "that (for Sin) no son of Man hath Breath,/ But once must die; Wages of SIN is DEATH" (93-94). The turn from "natural" to "spiritual" mourning facilitates consolation in elegies on both sides of the Atlantic; the difference is who does the turning. William Scheick maintains that the central distinction we can draw between English and American funeral elegies is the deployment of the community. American funeral elegies, he argues, tend to depict the community as a collective body, "in which the ministers represented the soul...ideally guiding the New World laity or corporation" (291). In their English counterparts, however,

the community is invoked not as vital center but as comforting frame for the...elegist. In the English funeral elegy this sense of community, perhaps an outgrowth of the *ars moriendi* tradition stressing a Christian



solidarity at the time of death, provides a large circumference within which can be found consolation for the loss of the deceased. (291)

Because the American Puritan funeral elegy represents the community as a collective self, the turn to a contemplation of sin that provides the elegy's personal and existential consolation must also function communally, and it is here that gender becomes a problem.

We might explore this difficulty by comparing Bradstreet's epitaph for her mother with the elegy she wrote a decade later when her father died. Both poems are fairly conventional in their list of the virtues of the dead. To readers unfamiliar with the genre, one of the most surprising elements of the Puritan funeral elegy may be the incredibly formulaic way in which these virtues are presented. Indeed, the qualities for which departed saints are praised tend to be so standard that, as Scheick notes, "in elegy after elegy the nominal subjects coalesce in a broad configuration" (296). But this narrowed focus on heavenly virtues serves an important function. It offers a model for mourners to follow, so that once they have shifted the focus of their grief from one particular loss to a broader mourning for their own sinful state, they may emulate the exemplary qualities of the departed saint to address communal, existential grief.

While Bradstreet's poems for both of her parents make use of exemplarity, the qualities described in the two lost saints differ dramatically. Dorothy Dudley was "a friendly neighbor, pitiful to poor/ [W]hom oft she fed and clothed with her store" while her husband was, "[o]ne of thy Founders, him New England know/ [w]ho stayed thy feeble sides when thou wast low" (4-5, 28-29). She exerted her corrective authority

over servants, to whom she was “wisely awful, but yet kind/ [a]nd as they did, so they reward did find” (6-7). Thomas Dudley, on the other hand, participated in such important matters as the Hutchinson trial, where he could prove he was “to errors still a foe/ [w]hich caused [his] apostates to malign so” (34-35). Dorothy Dudley was significant as “[a] loving mother and obedient wife,” “[a] true instructor of her family,” who left behind “a blessed memory” for all of her children (3, 8, 14-15). Her husband was a “[t]rue patriot of this little common weal,” who “spent his state, his strength and years with care/ That after-comers in them might have share” (33, 31-32).

Cheryl Walker identifies a trend in her comparison of funeral elegies for men and women: “It was conventional to write elegies describing women in undifferentiated terms as images of piety and humility. It was conventional to extol men as leaders and thinkers whose loss threatened the entire fabric of society” (116). In fact, the biblical allusions employed in the Puritan funeral sermon frequently carry over into elegiac descriptions of male saints as exemplars. Repeatedly, these lost are described as “gapsmen,” “pillars,” their deaths a “breach.”<sup>25</sup> While the losses of male saints are represented as blows to the church and community, the losses of female saints are described in terms of the effects on their families. Because communal “natural mourning” can really only make sense within the context of an elegy for a departed male saint, the interdependent relationship between personal and existential consolation begins to falter when the elegized is a woman. When the death of a saint results in a “breach,” the sins of the community are made visible. Then, when the entire community

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<sup>25</sup> See Lonna Malmscheimer’s study of the American funeral sermon, “Daughters of Zion,” p. 493-4.

undertakes the turn from “natural” to “spiritual” mourning, this turn may provide both personal and existential consolation.

Because the gendered conventions of exemplarity require a male saint to spur this communal shift, elegies for women and children tend to achieve their personal consolation through assertion rather than through a transformation, and reckoning, of grief. Sin is rarely mentioned; instead, mourners are reminded that death is inescapable and that it is only by following the example of the elegized that they may live on. Thus, the turn to existential consolation arrives as almost a non sequitur. Departed female saints may await their mourners in heaven, and may demonstrate the qualities which will allow their mourners to reach them there, but since it is the idea of loss in general rather than a specific loss that spurs the turn from “natural” to “spiritual” mourning, the personal consolation of these elegies flattens from argument and practice to mere assertion. Thus, while elegies for male saints may alleviate personal grief by channeling the energy of grief toward existential consolation, elegies for female saints address personal grief through arguments against “over-mourning” and seek their existential consolation through a seemingly unrelated process. The turn to exemplarity further distances the elegist from a particular loss when employed in elegies for departed female saints. If each death offers an equal opportunity for the *memento mori* that opens the door to existential consolation, then the erasure of particulars that facilitates this consolation serves no purpose in addressing personal grief. The burning of a house, for example, might offer a similar chance to ponder one’s earthly attachments and demonstrate one’s obedience to god.

The problematic effects of this discrepancy become clear when we look at one of the central challenges for Puritan funeral elegists: how might they lament without offending god? As Hammond notes, “On the one hand, biblical precedent made it clear that a failure to mourn revealed a shameful indifference to God’s people...On the other hand, to grieve according to one’s natural impulses revealed a misguided compulsion to lament what should be celebrated as a saint’s final victory” (120). The turn to “spiritual” grief works to resolve this difficulty by allowing some room for lament. Personal grief may now be indulged (even if only for a moment), since the energy of this grief will soon be redirected into lament for one’s own sins. The greater the lament, the greater the force of the spiritual mourning.

Urian Oakes’s 1677 elegy for the Reverend Thomas Shepard provides a telling example. Of that poem’s 52 stanzas, at least twenty are devoted to lamentation. And Oakes’s laments are not restrained. Here, for example, is the tenth stanza:

Oh! That my head were Waters, and mine Eyes  
A flowing Spring of Tears, still issuing forth  
In Streams of bitterness, to solemnize  
The *Obits* of this man of matchless worth!

Next to the Tears our sins do need and crave,

I would bestow my Tears on *Shepards* Grave. (55-60)

While Oakes’s lamentation is unusually emotional, the poem demonstrates the way in which such mourning will help the community (here figured as one body) gain awareness of its own sinfulness, and thus opens the door for communal existential consolation:

See what our sins have done! what Ruines wrought  
And how they have pluck'd out our very eyes!  
Our sins have slain our *Shepard!* we have bought,  
And dearly paid for, our Enormities.

Ah Cursed sins! That strike at God and kill

His *Servants*, and the Blood of *Prophets* spill. (277-282)

Here also, we can see how such lamentation can only function “productively” in elegies for male saints. If the loss of a female saint poses no real threat to the community, then anything more than cursory acknowledgement of that loss risks indulging the elegist’s own “natural grief” without moving the larger readership toward existential consolation. This may account for the last words of Bradstreet’s poems for her parents: Dorothy Dudley’s ends with “memory”; Thomas Dudley’s ends with “lament.”<sup>26</sup>

*In honour of that High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth of most happy memory.*

As in her pastoral elegies, Bradstreet uses the Puritan funeral elegy to highlight the gendered limitations of the genre and to refuse the exchange of personal grief for existential consolation. Ultimately, I would suggest, we can read Bradstreet’s familial elegies as demonstrations of the limitations of the Puritan funeral elegy that she identifies in her poem for Queen Elizabeth. In that poem, Bradstreet draws from several elegiac

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, there are a few elegies for women that do engage “natural mourning,” but there’s nothing to compare to Oakes’s elegy. The closest, perhaps, is Edward Taylor’s 1689 elegy for his wife. Even so, Taylor limits his lament to the first third of the poem and is careful to create an audience for the poem – “thy Babes, and theirs”- who might be able to engage the Puritan model on a microcosm (51). Also notable is the fact that, upon Taylor’s death, the only volume of poetry in his library was a collection that also included familial elegies that violated convention - Bradstreet’s 1678 *Several Poems*. (Johnson, 321).

subgenres but ultimately conforms to none. If anything, the poem reads as an encomium, an extravagant celebration of the queen's accomplishments, and an apologia that holds up the departed queen as evidence of women's value. But Bradstreet asks us to read the poem as elegy as well: in the proem she writes that "Mongst hundred Hecatombs of roaring Verse,/ Mine bleating stands before thy royal Hearse," and this poem, like her elegies for Spenser and for her father, closes with epitaph (15-16). Although the poem resists generic classification, we cannot ignore its engagement with the elegy. But which elegy? The queen was an occasional poet, but Bradstreet makes no mention of this fact, and the vocational inheritance central to the pastoral never comes into play in this elegy. In fact, Bradstreet explicitly rejects the pastoral model in the very first line of the poem, writing that "No Phoenix Pen, nor Spenser's poetry" will be sufficient to address "Eliza's works, wars, praise" (24, 26). And both her evocation of the hearse and the fact that, after the proem, Bradstreet spurns the central role reserved for the pastoral elegist in favor of communal mourning tie the poem to the American funerary tradition. Yet the poem is written with a linguistic bravado that belies the plain style of the Puritan funeral elegist, and in its absolute absence of lament, it lacks the somber tone of those poems.

Although we should read Bradstreet's poem for queen Elizabeth as a poem that participates in several genres, we must note that the organization of the poem itself, which begins with praise of the lost subject, moves to a call for communal introspection, and concludes by addressing questions of substitution, mirrors the consolatory structure of the Puritan funeral elegy. Of course, Bradstreet resists the individual conventions of consolation in this poem as in her earlier elegies for Sidney and Du Bartas. But by

exploring the ways that Bradstreet's poem for Queen Elizabeth invokes and distorts the structure of the Puritan funeral elegy, we can see how it also highlights the limits of the subgenre's ability to console when the subject is anyone other than a departed male saint. Since the queen is someone whose death obviously would threaten the community, this poem, like the elegy for Du Bartas, might easily follow the traditional consolatory apparatus of the Puritan funeral elegy. Despite its rollicking verse, it could use this particular loss as a spur to the existential consolation that answers a personal grief. As our previous study of the Puritan funeral elegy has suggested, however, the conditions of exemplarity through which "spiritual mourning" might provide personal as well as existential consolation fail to accommodate a female departed. Bradstreet's elegy for Queen Elizabeth, in which existential consolation cannot and does not answer a particular loss, models the rhetorical limits of consolation when a woman is placed at the center of the elegy. The arguments for women's value that conclude the poem thus become an interrogation of the very social and literary codes that prevent such consolation from developing from argument into psychic practice.

The two ways in which Bradstreet's poem for Elizabeth most clearly situates itself outside of the tradition of Puritan funeral elegiac practice – the absence of lament and the linguistic play – together also posit a critique of that subgenre. While many of Bradstreet's later family elegies offer us the sense of a woman grappling with devastating, personal losses, this poem contains not a single lament. Nowhere do we find evidence of the grief that attends Bradstreet in her elegies for her daughter in law or grandchildren, or even in her elegy for Du Bartas. In place of the plain style and

mournful tone of those poems, the language here is Bradstreet at her most playful, rhyming and punning to great effect. We learn that, when called upon, Elizabeth “frankly helped Franks brave distressed king” (49). And when the king and courtiers of Spain suggested “that women wisdom lack to play the Rex,” Elizabeth “taught them better manners to their cost”: “She wracked, she sacked, she sunk his Armadoe” (32, 46). Certainly Bradstreet’s own removal from the subject of her poem facilitates some of this play, but the absolute lack of grief seems out of place. As Dennis Kay’s survey of elegies for Queen Elizabeth makes clear, the English funeral poems produced upon the Queen’s death were marked, in part, by their extravagant lamentation.<sup>27</sup> Bradstreet’s refusal to engage any such lament may then be read in part as a resistance to the pastoral model in which the poet must justify his right to mourn before undertaking the elegiac task. But in her elegy for Du Bartas as in her later family elegies, Bradstreet finds a way to engage personal grief without redirecting it toward existential consolation. When read in the context of Bradstreet’s other elegies, the absence of personal grief from this poem must give us pause.

I would argue that Bradstreet’s turn from lamentation produces a poem that models the result of what happens when the arguments against over-grieving that answer personal grief in Puritan funeral elegy are followed to their extremes. In a poem that explicitly argues for women’s equality, that honors a queen lauded in the epitaph as the “pattern of Kings,” and “the envy’d, yet unparallel’d Prince,” (124, 126) Bradstreet may have been particularly careful to avoid an indulgence in grief already coded womanly.

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<sup>27</sup> See Kay’s section “Luna’s Extinct” in *Melodious Tears*, 78-90.



The result of this resistance not to over-grieving but to grief itself is a poem that is pure performance, and perhaps it is because in this instance Bradstreet does not call upon the genre to perform “a mimesis of mourning” that she is free to show us how, for her as for Elizabeth, it cannot (Ramazani 28). Making no pretensions to a show of personal grief, Bradstreet can praise the lost queen and trace the operations and limitations of existential consolation without engaging the “economic problem of mourning.”

Like many Puritan funeral elegists, Bradstreet begins her poems by providing readers with an account of the virtues of the departed subject. Because the proem marks the poem as elegy, readers might be prepared for the generalized list of saintly virtues that generally opens these poems. Yet here already we find the limits of the consolatory mechanics of the subgenre, for if Bradstreet were to frame Elizabeth as one whose loss should provoke a turn to communal spiritual mourning, then she would have to present the queen as a model for women and men alike. Bradstreet can and does compare Elizabeth’s virtues to those of her male counterparts, however, the genre’s use of exemplarity presents the first problem raised by a female departed: Bradstreet cannot fall back on the standard metaphors and tropes through which the significance of the loss of a male saint might be made clear to the community. No matter how important the queen may have been, Elizabeth is no “gapsman.” In fact, in standard formulations of exemplarity for women, they serve only as models for other women. Joshua Sylvester’s “An Epitaph, on ever-blessed Queen Elizabeth,” for example, follows this pattern when he notes the “royall vertues” of “mildness,” “honour,” “courage,” “Temp’rance,” “Prowess,” “Prudence,” and “Equity,” before suggesting that these virtues, “(like a

Candle on a Hill)/ Shin'd to her Sex for conduct farre and near" (3-6, 11-12). Because of the limits placed on women's influence in the church, the standard metaphors through which Elizabeth might provide an example for the entire community, rather than just "her sex," cannot apply.

As queen, of course, Elizabeth's death would have presented a threat to the community, but, as we shall see, the very anomalies that make her worthy of communal mourning also make it impossible for her to serve as an exemplar. Cotton Mather may well trace an elegiac lineage of American "gapsmen," but, as Timothy Sweet notes, "Bradstreet may have found the example of Elizabeth empowering – a figure waiting to be read as a living deconstruction of the gender system – but she could not after all occupy Elizabeth's privileged position" (165). Bradstreet addresses this failure of language and asserts her subject's spiritual importance by stressing Elizabeth's importance as a Protestant queen, a defender of the faith. She maintains that the queen was "so good, so just, so learn'd so wise/ From all the Kings on earth she took the prize" (25). And she goes on to offer evidence of her claims: of the 91 lines of "The Poem," 66 are devoted to explaining the Queen's "works [and] wars" (21). The main focus of Bradstreet's list, therefore, becomes not Elizabeth's "royal virtues," but rather her accomplishments. The difficulty here is that in the course of justifying Elizabeth as a worthy subject of communal spiritual mourning, Bradstreet must destroy the exemplarity through which Elizabeth's mourners might stay their existential grief. Because the gendered conventions of exemplarity offer no language with which to represent a female departed saint whose death threatens the community, any claim that the death does

present a threat must be proven. This proof, however, necessarily erases the generalizing force of exemplarity, thus defeating the purpose of the convention.

Bradstreet's conclusion of her list of Elizabeth's accomplishments and virtues supports a reading of this poem as a critique of elegiac conventions, for she expressly argues that the genre in which she writes is insufficient to the task of praise:

Her personal perfections, who could tell  
Must dip his Pen i'th' Heliconian well,  
Which I may not, my pride but doth aspire  
To read what others write, and then admire (88-91).

Although we might read this as yet another invocation of the humility topos, we've seen enough of Bradstreet's subversion of that convention to question her use of it. In fact, this passage reinstates the limits of elegy when women write, for not only may Bradstreet not "dip her pen" into the spring that flows from the home of the Muses, the implicit gendered limits of that image are made explicit in her pronoun choice in line 89. In a poem concerned throughout with gender and its representations, Bradstreet's suggestion that only a male poet might access Parnassus and thus accurately describe Elizabeth's fame leads us to read these lines not as an admission of failure but as a critique of both elegiac subgenres. Only in the pastoral might Bradstreet access the language necessary for cross-gendered praise, but only as a Protestant queen may Elizabeth be appropriately mourned by the community.

How, then, does Bradstreet manage the problem of exemplarity? Wendy Martin argues that she resists it entirely, that her chronicle of the queen's accomplishments

“shifts the emphasis to the queen’s personal attributes – her magnetism, intelligence, and political acumen, dramatizing Elizabeth’s prowess as an individual woman, not as God’s representative on earth” (41). Bradstreet’s resistance to exemplarity, however, does not take the form of a celebration of particulars. In fact, the queen is abstracted in this poem much as the departed saint is abstracted in other Puritan funeral elegies. As Timothy Sweet points out, Elizabeth does not merely provide an argument for women’s equality, she becomes it (164). The queen is represented throughout the poem not as a singular individual but as an argument. Early on, Bradstreet makes this metaphor explicit, asking, “can you, doctors, now this point dispute./ She’s argument enough to make you mute” (40-41). Therefore, the queen does serve as a kind of exemplar, but instead of demonstrating saintly virtues, she demonstrates the worth of women.

Immediately after noting the limits of elegiac conventions, Bradstreet returns to this argument to close her poem. Instead of presenting the images of the dead content in heaven and admonitions against over-grieving with which elegies for female saints generally answer personal grief, Bradstreet asks,

Now say, have women worth, or have they none?

Or had they some, but with our Queen it is gone?

Nay Masculines, you have thus tax’d us long,

But she though dead will vindicate our wrong. (95-99)

Just as the lost male saint-as-exemplar provokes a turn to communal introspection, so too does the lost Elizabeth-as-argument. But while a contemplation of communal sins may serve as an invitation to the existential consolation that answers personal loss, this turn to

communal values goes unanswered. In one swift rhetorical move, Bradstreet both imitates the argumentative structure that provides the only personal consolation for female elegized subjects and uses that structure to examine the values that set it in place.

Because, as we have seen, existential consolation cannot answer personal grief in elegies for female saints, the personal consolation of these poems occurs not as a result of the elegiac mechanics of consolation, but rather as argument. Bradstreet closes her poem by returning to an image frequently used to make such arguments in the genre. Of the two possible assertions that are used to calm personal grief – that over-mourning is a revolt against God and that the dead beloved is content in heaven – Bradstreet’s eschewal of lamentation makes the first impossible. Therefore, she turns to the second. Like each of the other engagements with generic conventions in this poem, however, the image that readers expect – of an Elizabeth content in heaven, a saintly Queen to replace the one that’s lost – is not the one the poem presents. Instead, Bradstreet informs us that Elizabeth “was a Phoenix Queen, so shall she be;/ Her ashes not revived more Phoenix she” (90-91). Evoking the queen’s own emblem, Bradstreet’s argues that “for our Queen [there] is no fit parallel” (89). The poem thus concludes with an insistence on the value of the lost subject, with Bradstreet informing her readers that, although

She set, she set like Titan in his rays,  
No more shall rise or set so glorious sun  
Until the heaven’s great revolution:  
If then new things their old forms shall retain,  
Eliza shall rule Albion once again. (106-110)

Bradstreet's refusals of replacement function in several ways. We might read these assertions as the answer to earlier elegists who alluded to James I at the end of their poems in order to "attempt to establish in the popular mind the new king's legitimacy" (Kay 82). In her insistence that the only fit replacement for Elizabeth is Elizabeth herself, Bradstreet troubles the economics of substitution at play not only in previous elegies for the queen but in all elegy. Ultimately, the poem draws our attention to the way the elegiac substitutions that allow for personal consolation within the Puritan funeral elegy – exemplar for departed saint, "spiritual" mourning for its "natural" counterpart, grief for submission to the will of god – work in service of existential, rather than personal consolation when the lost is anyone other than an esteemed male saint. Exemplifying Elizabeth as argument and insisting on her irreplaceability, Bradstreet writes a poem that praises the queen without providing an existential consolation that has almost nothing to do with the woman who's been lost.

Though the elegy for Queen Elizabeth was the last of the three "worldly" elegies published in 1650, it was one of nine elegies by Bradstreet published in the later edition. In fact, almost half of the "additional" poems Roberts selected for inclusion in the 1678 edition of Bradstreet's work deal with sickness and death. In his study *The Puritan Way of Death*, David Stannard offers us some context in which we might locate the publication of Bradstreet's second edition that may explain Roberts's editorial choices. At the time *Several Poems* was published, Boston was in the midst of a terrible smallpox epidemic:

In one day, on September 30, 1677, thirty people had died – the proportional equivalent of more than *sixty thousand* New Yorkers today ...Only two years earlier New England had endured the devastation of King Philip’s War, in which – not even counting the enormous numbers of Indian dead – greater casualties were inflicted in proportion to the population than would subsequently occur in any future war in American history. Death was everywhere in 1678. [original italics] (61)

Certainly readers would have wanted to know how Bradstreet dealt with losses that must have seemed familiar to them. Indeed, many of Bradstreet’s readers would have been elegists themselves; by this time the genre was so popular that it had come to be known as the “Geneva jig” (Hammond 21). And though Bradstreet never intended to make her later family elegies public, we know American readers responded positively to the collection as a whole, for a third edition (which was in fact a reprint of the second edition) was published in 1758.<sup>28</sup> Bradstreet’s poetry was so well respected and received that in his 1702 *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Cotton Mather refers to “Madam Ann Bradstreet...whose Poems, divers times Printed, have afforded a grateful Entertainment unto the Ingenious, and a Monument for her Memory beyond the Stateliest Marbles” (qtd. in White, “Tenth Muse” 69).

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<sup>28</sup> For more on Bradstreet’s continued popularity, see Pattie Cowell’s “The Early Distribution of Anne Bradstreet’s Poems.”

## *II. Mouths Put in the Dust: Bradstreet's Late Family Elegies*

While Mather's praise recalls the relationship between memory and monument central to the poetic and spiritual inheritance at stake in pastoral and Puritan funeral elegies, such concerns fall to the wayside in Bradstreet's late family elegies. In their place, we find a woman grappling with frequent personal loss. Between 1665 and 1669, Bradstreet buried three grandchildren and her daughter-in-law. In the elegies she wrote for them, we find not arguments for consolation but evidence of a growing dissatisfaction with the consolatory potential of the Puritan funeral elegy. Bradstreet's elegy for Queen Elizabeth demonstrates how the genre fails to provide a mimesis of mourning when neither elegist nor elegized is a departed male saint. In her later family elegies, we find Bradstreet wrestling with the flat assertions through which the genre offers consolation for such losses and dramatizing her struggle to achieve personal consolation even as she refuses the *memento mori* through which she might achieve, or provide, existential consolation. More than any of her previous elegies, these poems are, as Mitchell Breitwieser observes, "not moral and generic but about morality and genre" (*National Melancholy* 77).

In the following reading, I'll take Bradstreet's last family elegies slightly out-of-order, beginning with her elegy for her daughter-in-law Mercy Bradstreet and then reading the elegies for the grandchildren chronologically. I'll begin with the elegy for Mercy because she, unlike the children, might be used to supply mourners with an imitable model through which they can address existential fears. After exploring the ways that Bradstreet avails herself of both assertions key to personal consolation – that



the loss is god's will, and that the lost beloved is content in heaven – I'll go on to look at the way that Bradstreet revises the convention of exemplarity in this poem so as to refuse even the possibility of existential consolation. In my readings of the elegies for the grandchildren, I hope to show how Bradstreet questions not only the desirability of existential consolation but even its possibility within the elegy, presenting submission to god's will as an increasingly unsatisfying answer to personal grief. Neither clinging to the dead nor refusing to lament their loss, these elegies strive for personal consolation even as they allow no opportunity for the community of mourners to demonstrate their saintly virtue, no exchange of personal grief for existential comfort. Although her occasional acceptance of religious consolation and her refusal to attack her dead separate Bradstreet from modern anti-elegists, she shares with them a resistance and interrogation of conventions that fail to speak to her losses, an examination of the motivation of elegiac consolation, and a refusal of the economic exchange required by generic conventions. Dividing personal from existential consolation, we find that, in refusing the latter, Bradstreet's poems for her family, like modern anti-elegies, "turn against the history of consolation precisely so as to find fault with the strategies of commemoration the poet-mourner inherits as normative in her society...suggesting that the other's value does not correspond merely to utilitarian or rationalized uses of the other" (Spargo, "Contemporary Anti-Elegy" 417). Too frequently read as evidence of the "approachable" Bradstreet, the "Anne" that the editors of the Norton Anthology website set against the devout "Mistress Bradstreet," these poems in fact evidence a complex and nuanced struggle and negotiation with the conventions of elegy, revealing not the

unmediated grief of “Anne,” but instead an American elegy that, from the first, has accommodated the types of resistances, revisions, and ethical complaints that mark the anti-elegy.<sup>29</sup>

*To the Memory of My Dear Daughter-In-Law, Mrs. Mercy Bradstreet, who Deceased September 6, 1669, In the 28 year of her Age.*

The last of the family elegies published in *Several Poems*, Bradstreet’s elegy for her daughter-in-law Mercy Bradstreet begins with an almost weary recognition of the regularity of loss. The opening anaphora, with its stress on the word “and,” begins the poem almost *in medias res*, situating this death as the latest in a series of connected losses whose collective weight adds to Bradstreet’s own grief: “And live I still to see relations gone, / And yet survive to sound this wailing tone” (1-2). Indeed, the first twenty lines – slightly over half the poem – are given over to lamentation. Yet unlike the elegies for the grandchildren, here the loss is compounded by the suggestion that it is not Mercy’s death alone for which Bradstreet grieves. Addressing Mercy’s husband Samuel, she explains, “My bruised heart lies sobbing at the root, / That thou, dear son, hath lost both tree and fruit” (12-13). Framing the loss in terms of its effects on her son Samuel, Bradstreet is able to present a lament for Mercy which might be read not as a vent for “natural” womanly over-grieving, but rather as a way to identify with, and thereby console, her

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<sup>29</sup> On the author page for Anne Bradstreet, the website for *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* recommends students “look for at least two voices, two sides of one personality speaking in her poems: there is Mistress Bradstreet the devout Puritan, leading parishioner and well-known wife of a colony official; and there is Anne, mother, lover, grandmother, who feels the full range of joy and pride and grief and who struggles to reconcile these powerful perceptions and feelings with the severe theology which pervades her community and her faith.” They then offer several suggestions for moments when students may find “Anne” in the selections they provide.

son. Because Mercy's death is not framed in terms of sinfulness, the lament cannot be diverted into the kind of "spiritual" mourning that leads to existential consolation in elegies for male saints. Instead, it works to address personal mourning by recording the extent of the loss.

One result of this lament is that the focus of the poem becomes mourning, rather than Mercy. Because the poem expands on the effects of loss itself rather than what has been lost, it is striking that Bradstreet avoids the turn to exemplarity. Yet here, in the only of her family elegies that might make use of a convention that fails when the lost described are children, the description of Mercy herself is limited to three lines.

Bradstreet tells Samuel, who had departed for Jamaica at the time of his wife's death, that she had

Loved thee more (it seemed) than her own life  
Thou being gone, she could no longer be,  
Because her soul she'd sent along with thee. (21-23)

In place of the catalogue of saintly virtues we find in Bradstreet's poem for her mother or Sylvester's elegy for Elizabeth, the only description of Mercy we have suggests an almost sinful attachment to human bonds.

Many critics have noted Bradstreet's unusual reluctance to employ exemplarity, but most, like Cheryl Walker, read this resistance as a refusal of generality. Mitchell Breitwieser, for example, suggests that Bradstreet's elegies hold exemplarity at bay in order to "preserve an area of the real...an aggregate of experience recalled at a pitch that precludes the ability to subsume it, that recalls what was" (*National Melancholy* 83). But

as in her elegy for Queen Elizabeth, Bradstreet here chooses not to counter the generality of exemplars with a specific description of the lost. Unlike the burned home, whose tables and chests are recalled with such tender attachment that even today we might imagine them, her daughter-in-law is no more present to us than Dorothy Dudley was. Instead of reading this refusal of exemplarity as a rejection of all abstraction, therefore, I would suggest that we might read it as a refusal of the type of abstraction that might allow readers to put personal loss in service of existential consolation.

Bradstreet's careful negotiation of mourning, which begins in resisting the conventional exemplarity, continues in the way that she employs the two standard arguments through which Puritan funeral elegy generally asserts personal consolation. Like many elegies for departed female saints, Bradstreet represents Mercy's death as a freedom from the pain of this world and a victory over death that allows her access to heaven. She also reminds her reader that Mercy's death was the will of god. What is interesting about Bradstreet's use of these conventional assertions is how, in each, she shuts out any possibility that they may be used for existential consolation. In her figuration of Mercy as a victor over death, for example, Bradstreet notes that "One week she only passed in pain and woe" (25). However, she neglects to include any conventional account of the "good death" that might assuage reader's fears of their own demise.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, when she imagines Mercy in heaven, she is "with her children four,"

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<sup>30</sup> For an example of how the description of the "good death" might put personal grief into the service of existential consolation, we might look to the end of Cotton Mather's elegy for his wife, "[Go then, my Dove, but now no longer mine]." Mather tells his wife, "I faint, till thy last words to Mind I call;/ Rich Words! HEAV'N, HEAV'N WILL MAKE AMENDS FOR ALL." (11-12). In fact, these words provide such comfort that they also provide the last line for Nicholas Noyes's proxy elegy for Abigail Mather, "A Consolatory POEM Dedicated unto Mr. COTTON MATHER."

not Christ. Should Samuel imagine himself in Mercy's place, then, his own death would result in a reunion with her, an answer to personal grief.

Bradstreet further eschews the possibility of a shift to existential mourning in the closing of her poem. She tells Samuel

Cheer up, dear son, thy fainting bleeding heart,  
In Him alone that caused all this smart;  
What though thy strokes though sad and grievous be,  
He knows what is the best for thee and me. (34-37)

These lines are remarkable in that they explicitly frame the turn to god as a resolution for personal grief. Mourning is not a test by which Bradstreet and Samuel may prove their worthiness. There is nothing to learn here about over-attachment to earthly bonds, and Mercy's death presents no opportunity to prove themselves to god. In place of a judge to whom they might demonstrate their obedience and thereby address any existential fears, Bradstreet closes the poem by offering her son, and herself, only the comfort that this particular loss, Mercy's death, is in god's plan for them. Though, as we shall see, the value of such consolation is increasingly questioned in Bradstreet's elegies for Mercy's children, the insistence on the primacy of personal grief evidenced in this poem continues through those elegies as well.

Any number of critics have noted Bradstreet's increasing dissatisfactions with the assertion that these common yet unimaginable losses – Elizabeth was a year and a half old when she died, Anne three and a half, Simon only one month – should be accepted as the will of god. What tends to trouble contemporary readers of these poems, however, is

how quickly Bradstreet seems to snap herself into “acceptance,” comforting herself with images of the children in heavenly bliss. I believe we can make sense of these sudden shifts by reading these poems within the framework of elegiac consolation. Ultimately, in Bradstreet’s elegies for her grandchildren, we find her testing the value of the arguments by which the Puritan funeral elegy extends comfort for personal losses. Like the elegy for Mercy, these poems maintain a relentless focus on a particular loss. And while Bradstreet readily addresses the need for submission to god’s will in her religious and meditative poetry, and even in her prose works, in these poems she demonstrates just how little such submission can answer for personal grief. Therefore, we might read her repeated questioning as a resistance not to the will of god but to the conventions of elegy that present submission to god as an answer to a particular loss rather than as a way to demonstrate one’s own virtue. In these elegies, the complex mechanisms by which the Puritan funeral elegy reassures practitioners in the face of loss is reduced to a single assertion: the dead are content in heaven. All other arguments for consolation, any arguments that might facilitate an exchange of personal grief for existential consolation, are ultimately presented as failures.

*In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet, Who Deceased August, 1665, Being a Year and a Half Old and In Memory of my Dear Grandchild Anne Bradstreet who Deceased June 20, 1669, Being Three Years and Seven Months Old*

Bradstreet’s elegies for her two granddaughters, Elizabeth and Anne, register her resistance to poetic, rather than spiritual, answers to loss. Like the elegy for Mercy Bradstreet, her poem for Mercy’s daughter Elizabeth engages the two assertions common

to Puritan funeral elegy: that the child is “settled in an everlasting state,” and that it is “His hand alone that guides nature and fate” (7, 14). What sets this poem apart from other Puritan funeral elegies, however, is the way it frames these arguments as inadequate responses to personal grief even before it presents them. Ultimately, the first argument is not enough to console Bradstreet, and the second is wholly extraneous. Because the poem is fairly short, I’ll include it here in its entirety:

Farewell dear babe, my heart’s too much content,  
Farewell sweet babe, the pleasure of mine eye,  
Farewell fair flower that for a space was lent,  
Then ta’en away unto eternity.  
Blest babe, why should I once bewail thy fate,  
Or sigh, thy days so soon were terminate,  
Sith thou art settled in an everlasting state.

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By nature trees do rot when they are grown,  
And plums and apples thoroughly ripe do fall,  
And corn and grass are in their season mown,  
And time brings down what is both strong and tall.  
But plants new set to be eradicate,  
And buds new blown to have so short a date,  
Is by his hand alone that guides nature and fate.

The structure of the poem suggests that the second stanza should provide an answer to the first, and contemporary Bradstreet critics have provided us with any number of possibilities for how it does so. Although she doesn't engage much genre criticism, Paula Kopacz's assessment of the poem suggests that it functions like any traditional elegy: "the poem is a process, not a product," and by the end, "Bradstreet may still feel upset about the death, but it is not accompanied by anger with God" (183). Both Robert Daly and Randall Mawer note that the extended metaphor of the last stanza pits god against nature. Daly suggests that the fact that this death seems so unfair, so unnatural, is itself proof that god has intervened, calling Elizabeth to heaven. Thus, he argues, the closing lines are

the best consolation for the survivors – that the child's untimely death is a clear act of providence, not merely a regrettable part of the order of nature. Those who truly love the child will of course miss her, but they should be consoled that she was singled out by God for an early entrance into heaven. (112)

Mawer maintains that, by pitting god in opposition to nature, Bradstreet blames god for the child's death.<sup>31</sup>

Neither of these readings, however, offers an answer to the question posed in the first stanza. Daly's argument would, of course, provide an excellent answer to the question, "Why has she died so young?" But that is not what Bradstreet asks. Indeed,

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<sup>31</sup> Mawer recognizes that such an accusation runs counter to the religious sentiment of Bradstreet's poetry, noting that "it seems impossible that Bradstreet, always strictly orthodox when she explicitly considered the role of pain in God's plan, was entirely aware of the doctrinal heresy in her poem" (37).



she provides an answer to that question in the first stanza, when she employs a fairly standard trope of child elegy to describe Elizabeth as a “fair flower that for a space was lent./ Then ta’en away into eternity” (8-9). The question is not “why this fate?” but “Why should I once bewail thy fate./...Sith thou art settled in an everlasting state?” (6-7). A closing line that recalls an admission to that everlasting state does little to change the question, a question that bluntly engages the key task of the elegy.<sup>32</sup> Using the poem to explicitly frame a question that it should but does not answer, Bradstreet ends up questioning the elegy itself. Once we know that the lost beloved is content in heaven, what more can be said? If the “process” of elegy were sufficient to address personal grief, one assumes, we’d end up somewhere other than where we’d begun. By presenting a conventional argument about the will of god as the unsatisfactory answer to the central question of elegy, Bradstreet highlights just how little these assertions of god’s will have to do with personal consolation.

Bradstreet’s elegy for her granddaughter Anne raises similar questions about the genre’s capacity for addressing personal loss. Recalling her description of Elizabeth as “my heart’s too much content,” Bradstreet here again addresses the dangers of placing

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<sup>32</sup> Both Daly and Mawer offer metrical evidence to back their claims, noting that the last line of each stanza is 12, rather than 10 syllables. Daly refers to Rosemary Laughlin, who argues that “the alexandrines effect a contrast of the eternal with the transient...[and] also suggest that a resignation to God’s will was a heavy thing for the poet to bear, especially since the slight irregularity of the meter produces a somewhat tortured hesitation” (qtd. in Daly 111). Mawer, noting that the last line of the poem would have to be tortured a bit to fit into iambic hexameter, suggests that the line is a pyrrhic spondee followed by two iambs, a trochee, and a final iamb. He writes, “What Bradstreet delivers, roughening the meter with the trochee “nature” and only just catching her balance for a closing iamb, “and fate,” is rushed and cacophonous, a deliberate stumble, an irresolution of the chord suggesting the speaker’s unreconciled feelings toward God, whose untimely taking of the child Elizabeth perverts the actuality of “nature,” just as the breaking of the rhythm wrenches at the word” (39). While I find Mawer’s scansion far more compelling than Laughlin’s, I cannot help but read the last line as anapestic tetrameter, which would place stresses on the key words “His,” “alone,” “nature,” and “fate,” and would usher us quickly out of the poem with a line, like Elizabeth’s own life, that seems shorter than we deserve.

too much stock in the attachments of this world (“Elizabeth” 1). She asks, “Was ever stable joy yet found below?/ Or perfect bliss without mixture of woe?” (“Anne” 12-13). The engagement of such ideas might easily start the reader on a course toward existential consolation, as they do in “Verses Upon the Burning of Our House.” Yet Bradstreet frames these questions not as new contemplations provoked by the loss, but as things she already knew. We need only look to Bradstreet’s earlier poetry and her prose works to find examples of these arguments. “The Flesh and the Spirit” takes time to address the dangers of earthly attachment, dangers made more explicit in “The Vanity of All Worldly Things.” In her unpublished prose essay “To My Dear Children,” Bradstreet directly addresses the exchange of personal grief for spiritual consolation suggested by these references to over-attachment:

Among all my experiences of God’s gracious dealings with me, I have constantly observed this, that He hath never suffered me long to sit loose from Him, but by one affliction or other hath made me look home, and search what was amiss; so usually it thus hath been with me that I have no sooner felt my heart out of order, but I have expected correction for it... sometimes He hath smote a child with sickness, sometimes chastened by losses in estate, and these times (through His great mercy) have been the times of my greatest getting and advantage; yea, I have found them the times when the Lord hath manifested the most love to me. Then I have gone to searching and...seldom or never but I have found either some sin I lay under which God would have reformed or some duty neglected which

He would have performed, and by his help I have laid vows and bonds  
upon my soul to perform His righteous commands. (241-242)

I turn to this passage not merely to show that Bradstreet has provided evidence that she does understand the capacity of grief to provide existential consolation, but also to highlight how, in these elegies, she presents that capacity as both something already understood and something that can do little to address the loss at hand:

How oft with disappointment have I met,  
When I on fading things my hope have set.  
Experience might 'fore this have made me wise,  
To value things according to their price. (10-13)

In lines like these, or in her later argument, “More fool then I to look on what was lent/  
As if mine own, when thus impermanent,” Bradstreet highlights the inadequacy of such understanding in the face of personal loss (18-19). While these “lessons” may well make her a better Christian, they fail to address the grief that attends a particular loss. The need for elegy itself is evidence of that failure.

Instead of turning to a submission to god’s will to achieve consolation, then, Bradstreet closes the poem with an image of reunion:

Farewell dear child, thou ne’er shall come to me,  
But yet a while, and I shall go to thee;  
Mean time my throbbing heart’s cheered up with this:  
Thou with thy Saviour art in endless bliss. (20-24)

In an attempt to reconcile the distress presented in the majority of the poem with the sudden comfort of the last lines, Mawer suggests that we read the poem as an angry response to loss. He writes,

There is no kissing of the rod in the poem's closing lines, despite their allusion to paradise ...the certainty of her own salvation...and of its imminence...only reinforces the speaker's proud refusal to lay her burden on the maker of her trouble. She will die soon. "Mean time," her "heart" will go on "throbbing" with honorable grief and well-earned indignation. (32-33)

Mawer's reading highlights the usefulness of turns to genre, for his image of a defiant, melancholic mourner seems at odds with a poem that closes with the word "bliss" (23). Indeed, his reading requires us to ignore the fact that Bradstreet provides a reason why her "heart" will not go on "throbbing": she tells us it's cheered by the understanding that Anne is with "her Saviour" (23). By reading this poem in terms of its negotiation of personal and existential consolation, then, we might better understand its close. If Bradstreet's problem is with poetry rather than theology, we can see why she would resist any "lessons" she could learn from this death, yet still choose to close with the comforting image of reunion.

*On My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet, who Died on 16 November, 1669, Being But a Month, and One Day Old*

If in her earlier elegies Bradstreet presents submission to God's will as extraneous to personal consolation, in her elegy for Simon she both stresses the difficulty of such

submission and for the first time explicitly refers to its relationship with existential consolation. Significantly, Bradstreet's only elegy to engage existential consolation is also the only one in which the grief belongs to an unnamed community. Like the elegy for Anne that precedes it, however, this short poem maintains its focus on grief until the last three lines, which present a turn to consolation with an image of the child in heaven:

No sooner came, but gone, and fall'n asleep,  
Acquaintance short, yet parting caused us weep;  
Cropt by th' Almighty's hand; yet He is good.  
With dreadful awe before Him let's be mute,  
Such was His will, but why, let's not dispute,  
With humble hearts and mouths put in the dust,  
Let's say he's merciful as well as just.  
He will return and make up all our losses,  
And smile again after our bitter crosses  
Go pretty babe, go rest with sisters twain;  
Among the blest in endless joys remain.

In the first fourteen lines, Bradstreet offers us a perfect example of the Puritan funeral elegy's argument against over grieving, complete with the turn to existential consolation that it may provide. As usual, however, she also stresses the failure of this argument in the face of personal grief. As many critics have noted, the "goodness," "mercy," and "justice" of god are hard to discern in the violent images presented here. Indeed, as Ann Stanford points out, "[i]f the word 'say' is emphasized, the poem comes close to

blasphemy. The goodness of god, though piously mouthed, seemed to be weighed and found wanting” (115). Thus, the turn to consolation that closes this poem appears to be even more abrupt than in the other family elegies.

In fact, Stanford’s emphasis on “say” offers us a way to understand this shift. By presenting this submission in terms of communal argument, Bradstreet leads her readers through the process through which a Puritan funeral elegy might provide consolation for the loss of a child while calling our attention to the process itself. Throughout the poem Bradstreet represents the difficult submission to God in terms of discourse or its lack: mourners are called upon to “be mute,” to “not dispute,” death itself forces their mouths “in the dust” (9, 10, 11). Ultimately stressing the failure of consolation provided by such proscriptions – these same mouths are recalled in the “smile” which provides faint recompense for the pain described – Bradstreet again suggests that the only consolation to be had rests in the image of the lost child in heaven. The apostrophe of the poem shifts with the speaker’s attention, and instead of coaching her fellow mourners, the poem concludes with Bradstreet addressing Simon himself, insisting that he “go rest with sisters twain;/ Among the blest in endless joys remain” (15-16).

The last lines of the elegy for Simon are unusual in their assertiveness. Bradstreet does not merely “cheer herself” with the understanding that her grandson is now in heaven; she directs him there, sending him away from herself and any mourners who might still remain. Indeed, perhaps it is in this poem that we most clearly see how Bradstreet’s engagement with the genre prefigures the modern anti-elegy, refusing an attachment to the dead even as it questions the genre’s capacity for consolation.

In the introduction, I framed this chapter as a way of better understanding Bradstreet's poetry and as a resistance to a critical reading of women's elegies as refusals to part from their dead. From Bradstreet's first elegy for Sir Philip Sidney to her last for her grandson Simon, we can identify a complex engagement with the genre's standard mechanics of consolation, and though in all of these elegies Bradstreet refuses to trade her personal grief for existential consolation, it is only in the later family elegies that she begins to question the genre's capacity for consolation altogether. Given the value that even these later elegies place on some form of apotheosis, however, we can see that while Bradstreet may represent personal consolation as difficult, she never suggests that it is undesirable.

Indeed, as evidenced by her prose writing, Bradstreet had no trouble using the difficult losses of her life in service of existential consolation, either. The fact that she refuses to do so in her elegies forces us to turn to questions of genre. Reading Bradstreet's elegies as a common group of texts instead of imposing a division between the "worldly" and the personal poems, I hope to have shown how Bradstreet's position as a woman writer of pastoral elegies forced her to trouble the initial exchange of personal grief for existential comfort through which those poems achieve their consolation. Once she moved on to write more "personal" poems, she continued this refusal, which (given her choice of subjects) could now do little to help her honor either her dead or her own grief. Reading Bradstreet's poems in this way, we find evidence of the same ethical complaints that motivate the modern anti-elegy. Resisting an easy answer to grief, revising conventions that fail to console, and turning first her back and then her anger on

the genre that excluded her, Bradstreet's poems inaugurate American women's elegies as an important site of early engagement with anti-elegiac resistance.



### *Chapter Three*

#### **Sighs to their Sighs: Hannah Griffitts's Sympathetic Identifications**

On February 13, 1751, twenty-four year old Hannah Griffitts sat down to write an elegy for her mother, Mary Norris Griffitts. "On the Anniversary Day of ye Death of my only Attachment to Life/My Beloved Parent" opens with a lament that the passage of time, which "whirls so soon the painful moment on" has returned the poet to the "gloomy day.../On which I am forever doomed to mourn." (7, 1-2). In the 116 lines that follow, Griffitts explains that the year that has passed since her mother's death has done little to assuage her grief.

Even time that rolls with yonder shores  
(the mourner's kind relief) refuses comfort  
So far is this from lessening my woes  
Calming my soul or healing of ye wound  
It writes (and with an iron pen it writes it)  
My former joys to increase my present grief  
On every passion – every faculty

It prints my loss, and stamps it deeply there

In never-fading characters (89-90).<sup>33</sup>

In place of Bradstreet's pen-snatching muses, here time itself supplants the mourner, scrawling her grief across the world. The unrelenting "stamp" and "print" of loss Griffitts invokes may well be read as a metaphor for her own elegiac production: among the poems she continued to pen over the next half-century are more than fifty elegies for her mother, one written each year on the anniversary of her death. This extraordinary elegiac cycle, archived along with copious elegies for others, has led the few scholars who study her today to regard Hannah Griffitts an important elegist within the Quaker community in eighteenth century Philadelphia.<sup>34</sup> Among her poems for friends, relatives, and a few well-known political and religious leaders are many that follow the standard paths to consolation, but the sheer number of elegies dedicated to Mary Norris Griffitts suggests that her daughter, like Bradstreet before her, struggled with the genre as a means to adequately represent and answer her grief.

In the following study of Hannah Griffitts's elegiac cycle for her mother, I return to the difficult relationship between personal and existential consolation that makes itself obvious when a woman is placed in the center of the elegy. At the heart of this project is a refusal to accept the argument that women elegists may be read as joining to form one monolithic voice, that the particular influences of place, class, race, and religion all fall

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<sup>33</sup> All quotations of Griffitts's poems are drawn from her papers, held by the Library Company of Philadelphia. In my transcriptions of these poems, I've updated spelling and punctuation when clearly distracting, but maintained Griffitts's use of "ye" instead of "thee," as well as her tendency to indicate elisions within words with an apostrophe.

<sup>34</sup> Blecki and Wulf, 28, Stabile 10

into line behind that of gender. Like modern anti-elegists, these poets find themselves presented with a genre incapable of meeting their needs, not necessarily because their needs are fundamentally different from those of their male counterparts, but because the conventions through which the genre speaks to the needs of those counterparts fail when a woman is placed at the center of the poem. Too often, work that attempts complex psychological negotiations and approaches the genre in sophisticated ways is dismissed as formulaic or sentimental, as artless articulations of grief. By drawing a distinction between personal and existential consolation, I suggested that Bradstreet provides us with an example of a poet whose work reaches for consolation even as it prefigures the questioning of elegiac utility that marks twentieth century anti-elegy. In this chapter, I argue that although Hannah Griffitts's adoption of extended mourning tempts us to read her work in terms of a tradition of women's poems of unceasing mourning, she resists not consolation but rather the conventions of a genre that would have her either surrender her grief or capitalize on it.

In Griffitts's extended elegiac cycle, we ultimately find an acceptance of personal consolation that allows us to read her poetry, like Bradstreet's, as engaging a tradition of consolatory funeral elegy, a refusal of existential consolation that Griffitts and Bradstreet share with modern anti-elegists, and a new insistence on the significance and depth of her loss that aligns Griffitts with both the sentimental elegists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the anti-elegists of the twentieth and twenty-first. Taking advantage of the developing language of sympathy and culture of sentiment that marked eighteenth century Philadelphia, Griffitts's elegiac cycle introduces the possibility for the

same kind of extended grief that characterizes the modern, melancholic anti-elegy, even as it deftly redirects existential consolation toward an answer for her particular loss. Although the cycle ultimately closes with personal consolation, the extended mourning that plays out over fifty years of elegiac production allows for an insistence on the value of both the mother who's been lost and Griffiths's own mourning. Like the elegists in Celeste Schenck's theory of "female elegy," Griffiths opens the possibility for productive melancholia in her poems. As David Eng and Shinhee Han argue, such a refusal to "get over" grief is tantamount to an ethical stance that insists upon the value of the lost subject, a value unrecognized by the larger community. They read extended mourning as a form of ethical protest,

the ego's melancholic yet militant refusal to allow certain objects to disappear into oblivion...If the loved object is not going to live out there, the melancholic emphatically avers, then it is going to live here with me. (365)<sup>35</sup>

In her evocative description and dramatization of the mourning process, her refusal of sympathetic ties with the living, and her extended deferral of personal consolation, Griffiths insists upon the value of her mourning and of the one whom she mourns.

While her lengthy engagement with mourning aligns Griffiths with both the modern anti-elegists and the inconsolable mourners Schenck locates at the core of her

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<sup>35</sup> Although Eng & Han argue in favor of "racial melancholia," their arguments for a productive melancholia that works to enforce the value of devalued lost subjects are echoed in works by Michael Moon ("Memorial Rags"), Douglas Crimp, ("Mourning and Militancy"), and José Esteban Muñoz (*Disidentifications*). For readings of productive attachment in terms more poetic than psychological see Schenck's "Feminism and Deconstruction" and Paula Backscheider's chapter on elegy in *Eighteenth Century Women Poets and Their Poetry*.

tradition of “female elegy,” Griffitts’s elegiac cycle does ultimately offer an answer to personal grief. Framing personal consolation in terms of heavenly reunion, she is eventually able to address her loss and model the acceptance that will facilitate such a reunion. Like Bradstreet, however, Griffitts prioritizes personal grief in a way that resists a trade of personal loss for communal, existential comfort. Adopting elements of the Puritan funeral elegy, the early sentimental elegy, and the early Romantic elegy, Griffitts’s cycle serves to expand her mourning even as she refuses to engage the kind of sympathetic identification that would allow others access to her grief. Reading Griffitts’s work as an extended narrative of personal grief and ultimate (if uneasy) resolution offers us insight into the complex negotiations of sympathy in early America. Furthermore, it forces us to distinguish between women’s lived experience of mourning and the poetry produced by such experience. Exploring Griffitts’s manipulation and adaption of various elegiac strains reveals the difficult psychological and artistic project her fifty-year elegiac cycle entails, allowing us another way to read a poetry traditionally dismissed as either overly emotional or formulaic.

This chapter begins with an exploration the genre as Griffitts entered it, one that traces the parallel shift that occurred as the communal Puritan funeral elegy turned its focus to the individual mourner and the pastoral elegy was increasingly supplanted by early Romantic poems written in what Martin Bloomfield calls “the elegiac mode.” These evolutions are significant, I argue, because they alter the mechanics of consolation within the elegy, recasting the mourner as a melancholic and positioning sympathetic identification, rather than literary inheritance or spiritual mourning, as a key qualifier for

existential consolation. In her pursuit of personal consolation, Griffitts draws from multiple elegiac traditions, including the Puritan funeral elegy, the sentimental elegy, and the Romantic elegy, critiquing and remaking conventions that developed primarily to provide consolation to male practitioners of the genre. Her fifty years of elegies speak to her insistence that her loss should be honored and her willingness to rewrite the genre of elegy until it could do so. Reading the cycle as one extended narrative, I show how Griffitts redirects the conventions that might serve to provide existential consolation toward an answer to her own particular grief. In so doing, I argue, Griffitts engages and rebukes contemporary ideas about the gendered role of the poetic mourner even as she works to answer her personal loss. In the second section, I show how Hannah Griffitts's insistence on personal consolation is significant, how in its representation of the journey from lament to consolation, her elegiac cycle calls into question the value of sympathetic identification from readers, ultimately rejecting a sympathy that might enable existential consolation in favor of what I call a "radical sympathy" between the mourner and her lost beloved, one that serves to both facilitate personal consolation and insist upon the value of the woman whose death evoked such grief.

### *I. Your Fidelity: Hannah Griffitts and her Sororal Network*

Hannah Griffitts was born in 1727 in Philadelphia, the eldest of three children. Her father, Thomas Griffitts, had emigrated to America from Ireland, and though he came to the colonies alone, with only one brother in the new world, he made a name for himself in trade and politics and eventually held several positions of prominence within

and around Philadelphia – Griffitts served as mayor of the town, and as a justice on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court (Wulf, 289-290). He was considered a fine match for Mary Norris, the daughter of a prominent, wealthy tradesman. Thomas and Mary Norris Griffitts had three children, and there is much to suggest that their middle daughter, Hannah, was frequently exposed to poetry: among her papers at the Library Company of Philadelphia are poems written by each of her parents, and by the age of ten she was writing poems of her own (Cowell 56).

In 1746, Thomas Griffitts died, leaving behind his wife, Mary Norris Griffitts, his son Isaac, and his daughters, Mary and the then nineteen-year-old Hannah. Although Isaac inherited most of his father's estate, the three women remained in the house in Philadelphia. On February 13, 1750, however, the lives of the Griffitts daughters were overturned when Mary Norris Griffitts died. Her daughters were left with very little, and were forced to move out of their home on March 8 (Wulf 290-292). They lived with their brother and his wife for a little over a year, and Hannah Griffitts's first elegy for her mother was composed during this period. In that poem, as in her letters, she writes of her difficulty coping with the change in status that accompanied her mother's death. Once a promising figure on the Philadelphia political landscape, by the time of his mother's death Isaac Griffitts had become an alcoholic with several debts around town. Although he provided his sisters with a place to live, he charged them a rent of 20 pounds a year, more than the sisters received in their annuity (Wulf 293). By mid-November of 1751, the situation had become untenable, and Hannah and Mary moved out of the city to live with their Uncle Isaac Norris at his nearby estate, Fairhill (Wulf 288).

In that move, Hannah Griffitts found the support she had lacked since her mother's death. Isaac Norris lived with his wife and his two daughters, Mary and Sarah, as well as his cousin Mary Lloyd and his sister Elizabeth Norris. The Griffitts sisters were integrated into the household, and Hannah continued her writing and began to find a place within a community of writers with whom she could share her work (Stabile 37). In 1759 she recited her poem "A Moral Meditation" in Quaker meeting, and in the early 1760s her brother put her in contact with Susanna Wright, a Quaker elder and poet who was a contemporary and friend of Hannah's mother, aunt, and uncle (Wulf 299). Wright encouraged Griffitts, who wrote prolifically during this time, dividing her poems between public and private verse. Aside from her occasional elegies she wrote poems to mark the end of every year. She also wrote reflections on religion and philosophy, including meditations on the use of faith and of reason. Frequently signing her work with the pseudonym "Fidelia," Griffitts exchanged poems with her cousin Deborah Logan, Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, and Wright, among others. Although most scholarship on Griffitts suggest that her poems circulated only through letters and their reproductions in commonplace books, a survey of contemporary periodicals reveals that she did occasionally publish her work. Scholars are right to note that she was ambivalent about publication and that the most important form of circulation of her poems was in manuscript. Her publication history, however, does suggest a degree of professional engagement with which Griffitts has not been previously credited. In 1761, her elegy for King George II appeared in Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, accompanied by the editorial note that "Fidelia is desired to send for the Money which accompanied the above



Lines, as we take no Gratuity for obliging the Public with such Performances.”

(*Pennsylvania Gazette* Jan 19, 1761). Despite such encouragement, in a letter of 1762 Griffitts asked Wright to keep the poems she sent “within the partial bounds of your family.” (qtd. in Cowell 56)

Although Griffitts rarely saw her poems in print, her participation in early American manuscript culture does constitute a form of publication. As Carla Mulford argues, “for many of the most prolific women of the early era” manuscript culture was “a preferred means of ‘publication’ at once ‘public’ and intimate” (112-113). Griffitts’s poetry circulated within a wide circle of female friends and fellow poets. When her cousin Milcah Martha Moore put together a commonplace book, it included eighteen of Griffitts’s poems, and in at least one schoolroom young women copied Griffitts’s memorial poems as exercises in penmanship and writing (Wulf and Blecki 31). Although none of Griffitts’s maternal elegies are included in Moore’s book, among her papers are multiple copies of several elegies, suggesting that she did indeed send them to friends and family to read. And she certainly sent other elegies she composed to mourning families. A poetic response to her elegy for Susanna James signed by “Florio” is included in Griffitts’s papers at the Library Company of Philadelphia. And as Karen Wulf notes in her introduction to *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book*,

Grateful acknowledgements to Griffitts can be found sprinkled through a variety of letters collections. For one example of the importance of Griffitts’s memorial poetry, see the note by Anna Bloodgood attached to a sample of Griffitts’s work, which reads, “On the death of my near & Dear

by Cousin Hannah Griffith Beautiful Poetry sent by her at their  
Respective Deaths. & preserved with care by me. (28)

During her time at Fairhill, Griffiths composed steadily and circulated her poems regularly. In 1766, however, the household began to break up (Wulf 305). Isaac Norris died that summer, and though his family continued to live on the estate, Griffiths's elegy for him suggests that his loss was deeply felt there. Three years later, her cousin Sarah Norris succumbed to smallpox, and shortly thereafter Sarah's sister Mary wed John Dickinson and moved away from Fairhill. The same year, 1770, Hannah moved with her aunt Elizabeth Norris to a house in Philadelphia. The coming of the war prompted some of Griffiths's most formidable political poetry. In 1768, her poem "To the Female Patriots" appeared anonymously in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. In 1776 she wrote an elegy for those killed in the Battle of Long Island, included in Moore's book. She composed scathing critiques of Paine, particularly after his attack on the Quakers in the portion of *The Crisis* published in April of 1777. When the city was under threat of attack during the Revolutionary war, Griffiths and Elizabeth Norris stayed where they were. In 1778, Griffiths wrote an elegy for the Quakers John Roberts and Abraham Carlisle, and that same year she published an elegy for the Virginia exiles Thomas Gilpin and John Hunt (*Pennsylvania Ledger* April 29. 1778).

In 1779, Elizabeth Norris died. Hannah remained in Philadelphia, though she traveled back to Fairhill with frequency. It was in 1791 that Mary Griffiths died, and that year in her elegy for her mother, Hannah Griffiths added her loss to the list. She wrote her last elegy for her mother in 1803, but despite the illness and blindness that attended

her later years, continued to write poetry for at least another ten. Griffitts died in the early fall of 1817 at the age of 90, surrounded by female friends and neighbors. Her cousin Deborah Norris wrote an account of her death, suggesting that Griffitts's last words paralleled the close of many of her own elegies: "We have lived for many years in unity and love, let us part in it, and oh if favour'd to meet in his kingdom who is the fullness of love," Norris records her saying, "may our friendship be perfected" (qtd. in Stabile 189).

Among her undated papers at the Library Company of Philadelphia is Hannah Griffitts's cleverly-titled poem "Monumental Vanity," in which the poet anticipates her own death and directs those she would leave behind in how she would wish to be mourned and remembered. Amid repeated returns to the "vanitas" motif are several allusions to elegy itself, almost all of which provide evidence of the skepticism with which Griffitts regarded the genre. She condemns

The mourning Equipage, drag'd slow along  
Where form, to form, unfeeling griefs repeat,  
The proud Inscription of a flatt'ring tongue,  
The enquiring rabble, & the gazing street. (5-8)

And instead hopes that she will pass "(By the great world, unnotic'd & forgot),"

No show, attend my Nature's last retreat  
But Decent, Rest beneath its grassy Clod,  
Virtue & friendship, Balm my humble seat  
And the free'd spirit, Center in its God. (27, 29-31)

Griffitts's resistance to becoming a subject of elegy may well be linked to the shifts that attended the genre between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Over the course of Griffitts's fifty year elegiac cycle, she would witness another shift in the genre as elegies responding to the American Revolution worked to create a national community of mourners. But even before this influx, the elegiac landscape into which Hannah Griffitts stepped looked different from the one in which Bradstreet had written. As Bradstreet's twofold engagement with elegy suggests, the genre has long been divided between "high," or self-consciously artistic, and "low," or primarily spiritual or emotional, poetic production, and in the hundred years that separate the two poets, each of these strains had shifted in significant ways.

## *II. Flattering Tongues: The Funeral Elegy in the Eighteenth Century*

During the eighteenth century, the Puritan funeral elegy changed in ways that affected the way the poem afforded its consolation. According to Kenneth Silverman, "by 1720, the vogue of the New England communal elegy was effectually ended" (qtd. in Cavitch 37). By the time Griffitts was writing her first maternal elegy, David Stannard argues, there was little within the contemporary elegy that spoke "about the community's loss, and there was a new sense of sentimentality and urgency in the message conveyed" (155). Perhaps because the mechanism for consolation within the Puritan funeral elegy is so dependent upon its assumption of a community of mourners who are together punished for their sins by the loss of a valued member of the community, the elegy's shift toward the emotions of an individual mourner was accompanied by concerns about the

sincerity of the grief expressed in such poems. We find evidence of such anxiety in Griffitts's references in "Monumental Vanity" to "unfeeling griefs" and "flatt'ring tongue[s]" (6-7). In his study on the American elegy, Max Cavitch argues that "Franklin, Green, and Breitnall all express dissatisfaction with their culture's persistent attachment to a mourning resource whose conventions have come to seem thoroughly evacuated of emotional authenticity and commemorative power" (44). Indeed, Franklin went so far as to publish in his *Dogood Papers* a recipe for such poems, suggesting that an "excellent elegy" calls for the usual encomium and description of a good death: "To this add his last Words, dying Expressions, &c. if they are to be had; mix all these together...Then season with a Handful or two of Melancholy Expressions" (qtd. in Cavitch 4).

Despite such concerns, it is clear that Griffitts drew on the Puritan funeral elegy as she crafted her filial elegiac cycle, for when read together the poems insist upon submission to the will of god as an answer to grief. As a Quaker, the form would have suited her religious beliefs, but as we shall see, Griffitts also adapts this consolatory narrative by continuously referencing an anticipated heavenly reunion between mother and daughter. As in earlier Puritan funeral elegies, heaven is represented as a reward for demonstrations of resignation to god's decree, but again and again Griffitts insists that the real prize is the lost beloved who waits for her there. In the only sustained study of Hannah Griffitts's work, Susan Stabile reads Griffitts's elegiac cycle for her mother as an "extended narrative," one in which the mourner and the mourned come together to form what she terms "remains" (180). Stabile suggests that

Unlike the Puritans' dour memento mori tradition, which focused on the

putrid and sinful corpse, or the Victorian sentimentalization of death through elaborate funerary art, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christians negotiated their ambivalent feelings about death through their hope for resurrection. More than an immortal reunion of body and soul, resurrection suggests a symbiosis between the corpse and the mourner, who together comprise the “remains.” (179)

Certainly Griffitts’s cycle provides evidence of the reunion Stabile includes in her description – nearly all of the fifty elegies include a recognition of Griffitts’s faith that she will rejoin her mother. Yet while Stabile’s metaphor provides compelling grounds for her reading of Griffitts’s relationship with her mother, her conflation of general mourning practice with its elegiac representation presents some problems. Stabile reads Griffitts’s cycle as “a narrative that traces Griffitts’s protracted experience of mourning,” one which “resists conclusion” as “[s]he persistently wavers between grief and consolation” (181, 182). While I agree with her proposal that the discrete poems come together to form an extended narrative, I disagree with Stabile’s contention that the narrative they form is one that resists conclusion. In fact, I would argue that Griffitts’s elegiac cycle presents a clear narrative of consolation, one that borrows from the Puritan funeral tradition to posit submission to the will of god as a sufficient answer to mourning, that draws on the sentimental tradition in order to articulate the deeply felt grief of the mourner and the significance of her loss, and on the Romantic tradition to address the relationship between sincerely-felt loss and its artistic representation. Reading the elegiac cycle in such a way again stresses the distinction between women’s lived

experience of loss and their poetic representations of such experiences, allowing us to read Griffitts's cycle not as a tedious expression of personal grief but rather as a sophisticated engagement of generic tradition. Furthermore, such a reading provides a way to trace the operation of personal consolation within the cycle, thus allowing us to explore more carefully Griffitts's engagement with and ultimate critique of sympathetic exchange within the eighteenth-century elegy.

The first step to such a reading, of course, is to establish the progress of consolation within the elegiac cycle. Given the sheer number of individual poems, a series of close readings might quickly prove overwhelming. Instead, I've tried to categorize and trace the ways Griffitts engages lament and consolation within the discrete elegies. In her brief introduction to Griffitts's poems in *Martha Milcah Moore's Book*, Catherine La Courreya Blecki suggests that "Griffitts wrote so many elegies that she developed a 'standard' elegiac form with common diction" (86).<sup>36</sup> Although her elegies for her mother differed from those she produced for friends and acquaintances, I believe that we can find a "common diction" within this cycle as well, since Griffitts tends to engage lament in four distinct ways. Nearly all of the poems begin with a recognition of the passage of time, and the date of her mother's death is often addressed directly by one of several epithets; it is the "gloomy day," the "day of grief," the "lamented day." In the early poems, particularly, she addresses the nature, depth, and effects of her loss.

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<sup>36</sup> Blecki continues: "Depending on the nature and occasion of the person's death, she often began by stating the deceased's relationship to the mourners and the community. She praised the dead for the person's afflictions and virtues. With the words, 'Hail favor'd Soul,' she imagines the dead person, newly arrived 'in the land of Canaan,' 'in the sweet climes of Liberty and Love.' Finally, she turns to the mourners and asks them to wipe away natural tears 'for the dear & fond Connection' broken, to submit to Heaven, and to follow the virtuous path of the beloved dead" (86).

Throughout, however, she insists on the significance of the subject of her elegy, explaining that she has lost her “dear loved parent” her “friend,” her “guide.”<sup>37</sup> Speaking to the depth of her loss, Griffiths says she is “forever doomed to mourn,” lamenting the “wound” that “wrung [her] soul with anguish past expression.” And she frequently characterizes the effects of her loss in terms that recall the mourner herself: her mother’s death “veils human scenes discouraged to [her] view,” and “veiled in black clouds the mortal vale of earth.”<sup>38</sup> Yet even the earliest poems also contain gestures toward consolation. With only two exceptions, the poems include an anticipated reunion between mother and daughter. In the early years, Griffiths includes images of her mother in heaven (most frequently in the 1760s), but these taper off. Beginning in the early 1760s, Griffiths’s elegies include calls for submission to the will of god. By the 1790s, she frames these calls in the past tense, providing evidence of her resignation. By tracing the amount of space she provides in the discrete poems to lament or to struggles with or acceptance of consolation, we can follow the narrative thread of the elegiac cycle. It is true that there are variations from year to year, that the cycle’s progression from lament to struggle to acceptance is, like grief itself, at times less smooth than one might hope.

Yet when we look at the big picture – by checking in every ten years, say – we can watch

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<sup>37</sup>Griffiths repeats images and phrases through the cycle and across discrete poems. For “gloomy day,” see poems of 1751, 1753, 1755, 1761, 1774, 1776, 1778, 1779 and 1794. “Day of grief” appears in 1777 and 1780, and “lamented day” in 1752, 1761, 1764, and 1765. The phrase “dear loved parent” first appears in 1758 and recurs in 1792 and 1793. Mary Norris Griffiths is described as both “friend” and “guide” in thirteen elegies between 1753 and 1796.

<sup>38</sup>In 1751, Griffiths writes she is “forever doomed to mourn” (1). This phrase recurs in 1752 (2). In 1756, she changes the line to “Heaven only knows how long I’m doomed to mourn” (11) And in 1768, she argues that her soul is “ever doomed to mourn” (2). Griffiths refers to her pain as a “wound” in twenty six of the elegies, and explicitly references her “anguish” in ten, though the above quote is from 1751 (36). The image of the mourning veil recurs in twenty separate poems between 1754 and 1798. The poems quoted above are the elegies of 1780 (11) and 1765 (5).



the cycle shift its emphasis from lament to acceptance. The following chart shows how much space Griffitts devotes (in both lines and percent of overall poem) to lament and to consolation in 1751 (her first elegy), 1761 (she was prevented from writing in 1760), 1770, 1780, 1790, and 1798 (the last verse elegy).

Year	Lament (passage of time, nature, depth, & effects of loss)	Images of a good death/ mother content in heaven	Heavenly reunion between mother and daughter	Desire/ calls for submission	Evidence of submission/ resignation (praise)
1751 (118 lines)	76% (90 lines)	5% (6 lines)	14.5 % (18 lines)	0%	3.5 % (4 lines)
1761 (54 lines)	61% (33 lines)	20% (11 lines)	15% (8 lines)	0%	4% (2 lines)
1770 (60 lines)	50% (30 lines)	0%	2% (1 line)	48% (29 lines)	0%
1780 (44 lines)	27% (12 lines)	0%	9% (4 lines)	64% (28 lines)	0%
1790 (36 lines)	0%	0%	8% (3 lines)	0%	92% (33 lines)
1798 (56 lines)	0%	0%	7% (4 lines)	0%	93% (52 lines)

Although Griffitts herself obviously never recovered from the loss of her mother, she self-consciously crafts a narrative of consolation that plays itself out through her annual elegies. This narrative – one of a daughter who struggles to accept her mother’s death as

the will of god - figures that loss as the “chastn’ing stroke” of a deity who strips from his subjects their attachments to the earthly world so that they might understand that he is “sufficient” (“1775” 4, “1790” 31). Although Griffitts’s elegiac cycle dramatizes the mourner’s resistance to such submission, it also offers itself as evidence of it.

As we’ve seen in the chapter on Bradstreet’s family elegies, the relationship between existential consolation and religious submission is one that was particularly fraught for female elegists. I suggest that, in Bradstreet’s resistance to such assertions of heavenly consolation, we can read a resistance to the conventions of the Puritan funeral elegy that operate differently depending on the subject of the poem. When an honored male member of the community is lost, then the grief that attends their passing becomes evidence of the Lord’s disfavor, and by submitting the community might prove its worth, its desire to submit to god’s will. Yet when a woman or child is placed at the center of the communal funeral elegy, such assertions fall flat and the loss is figured not as punishment but rather as the most recent in a series of opportunities that might allow the community to accept without complaint the will of god.

Although the shift away from communal mourning in elegy does much to ameliorate the difficulties Bradstreet found with the genre, Griffitts guards against appropriation in a few key ways. While she does counsel submission to the will of god as an answer to her grief, what’s remarkable about her cycle is that she redirects this seemingly-existential form of consolation to speak to her particular loss. As I’ve noted, almost all of the discrete elegies include an image of the mourner safe in heaven. Such an image is central to the Puritan funeral elegy; it triggers the poem’s existential

consolation. By following the example of the dead they mourn, the community of Puritan mourners might translate their personal grief in response to a loss into “spiritual grief” for their sins, thus assuring their own admission into heaven. While her poems for friends and acquaintances make use of the Puritan exemplarity that allows such a turn, only one of her elegies for her mother represents Mary Norris Griffitts as a model for Christian behavior. Instead Griffitts focuses in her early elegies particularly on the effect of this loss on her life and in nearly all of her elegies she imagines heaven as a site of reunion where she might rejoin her mother in a space free from loss and grief. She does imagine herself singing the praises of god, but almost always alongside her mother and only after she has been reunited with her lost beloved.

There are only two poems in which Griffitts does not explicitly reference reunion. In the first, written in 1763, reunion is implied, for Griffitts moves from an extended description of her mother safe in heaven to her own anticipation of heavenly union with god. The other, written in 1792, is unusual in a few ways. First, it is the only poem in which Griffitts mourns her mother and another person. She notes in the subtitle that the poem is written “with allusion to the late close stroke of my only sister’s decease Decr 2<sup>nd</sup> 1791.” More importantly, it is one of a very few poems written after Griffitts missed a year of her annual elegizing. She does not explain why she neglected to write the year before, noting only that she was “prevented writing on ye 14<sup>th</sup> of Feby last.” The last time she missed a year, 1786, Griffitts included the following headnote with her poem:

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of Feby of 1750 The Day that deprived me of a beloved  
mother, that day noticed by me since but being ill at this time in 1786

which continued for several months I was unable to commemorate it by my pen though it did not escape my memory and on this day in 1787 was prevented writing which two successive interruptions have raised a scruple in my mind whether my thus continuing to lament the dear departed saint was not offensive in His sight whose wisdom see fit to remove this blessing from my enjoyment and being now, I trust, fully convinced that his favor is the balm of every blessing and can alone make them such to us and also abundantly supply each or all the human comforts we may lose by the dispensations of this providence I hope if this day is again noticed by me it will be with true submission and not with repining.

Given her earlier understanding of a missed elegy as punishment for incomplete submission, it makes sense that Griffitts might see a second interruption, only five years later, as further evidence of god's displeasure. When coupled with the loss of her sister, we can understand why the elegy of 1792 begins, "No more my God may I complain/ Against thy will divine" and go on to claim that the mourner is,

Now taught by thy instructive rod

That every gift below

Is full supplied in thee my God

From whom all blessings flow. (5-8)

There are only six more elegies in the cycle written after this poem, and none of them represent acceptance as a future state, as we find in the earlier elegies. Again and again, Griffitts uses these last elegies to provide evidence of her resignation to god's will, a

submission that she represents as a necessary qualifier for her reunion with her beloved lost.

### *III. Waked to Ecstasy: The Proto-Romantic Elegy*

While Griffiths drew her model for personal consolation from the Puritan funeral elegy, her elegiac cycle also engages the burgeoning tradition of the Romantic elegy, most notably in the way that it considers and rejects the posture of the melancholic mourner by linking artistry and sympathy to critiques of inauthentic emotion. By the mid eighteenth century the “high” form of the genre, the pastoral, began to concern itself less with particular losses and the model of poetic inheritance through which such losses might be addressed and more with general meditations on death and loss – existential concerns that would lead Coleridge, in his famous 1833 essay, to define elegy as

the natural poetry of the reflective mind; it may treat of any subject but it must treat no subject for itself, but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself. As he will feel regret for the Past or desire for the Future, so Sorrow and Love become the principal themes of Elegy. It presents every thing as lost and gone or absent and future. (268)

Coleridge’s definition, of course, applies to the Romantic elegy of the nineteenth century, but we can already find traces of his conception in Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” considered by many to be an important poem in the development

of the Romantic elegiac tradition.<sup>39</sup> If Griffitts's evocation, in "Monumental Vanity," of "The enquiring rabble, & the gazing street" recalls Gray's "madden crowd's ignoble strife," it is useful to remember that the two poets are contemporaries. The year 1751, when Griffitts wrote the first elegy for her mother, marks a significant milestone in the genre, for it's entirely possible that as Griffitts was writing her poem in Philadelphia another kind of elegiac production was taking place across the Atlantic. We don't know when exactly Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was set in print, but it arrived on London bookshelves within 36 hours of Griffitts's composition, on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1751 (Ketton-Cremer, 109). Like Griffitts, Gray opens with a recognition of time, the tolling of curfew bells. Like Griffitts, he focuses on the emotions of the speaker, avoiding the encomium in which subjects of funeral elegies were traditionally praised. And like Griffitts, he closes with an image of reunion achieved through the elegist's own death. Griffitts ends her poem in the favor of god and the embrace of her mother, Gray in "the bosom of his Father and his God" (128). Despite their commonalities, however, the operations of consolation in the two poems are radically different, and we find in Gray's poem examples of some of the very conventions of the early Romantic elegy against which Griffitts's elegiac cycle rebels.

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is one of the famous elegies ever written, but it is difficult to determine whom, precisely, the poem mourns. Scholars agree that Gray was probably speaking to the 1742 death of Richard West, but the grief of the

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<sup>39</sup> For more on Gray as proto-Romantic, see Roger Lonsdale "The Poetry of Thomas Gray: Versions of the Self" and Anne Williams "Elegy into Lyric: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," as well as Patrick Vincent's *Romantic Poetess: European Culture, Politics, and Gender* and Marshall Brown's *Preromanticism*.

poem is diffuse, and works as a spur to the self-consideration and reflection that come to define later Romantic elegy. Like the pastoral, the Romantic elegy uses death as a trigger, encouraging the elegist to consider his own mortality and ameliorate existential anxiety by creating a poetic self that might live on in verse, thus ensuring the poet's artistic immortality. Certainly this happens in Gray, as in the pastoral tradition troubled by Bradstreet. Whatever Gray's poem does do, it doesn't mourn these actual dead. As Martin Bloomfield writes in his study of the "elegiac mode,"

self-reflection was its characteristic feature. This meaning must have taken over in the last half of the eighteenth century – the age of Werther, of 'The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,' and of poems featuring death or its approach, or lamentation over the world or the self. (156)

Indeed, Gray's elegy wasn't even originally written as an "elegy": until his friend William Mason suggested the change, Gray's poem was titled "Stanzas Wrote in a Country Churchyard" (Sacks 133).

While its demonstration of artistic prowess as a means to existential consolation mirrors some of the operations of pastoral elegy against which Bradstreet's early public elegies rebel, Gray's poem sidesteps the "economic exchange of elegy" that so troubled Bradstreet's engagement with the genre. The dead here are certainly used as an impetus to existential contemplation and demonstration of poetic artistry that might ensure the poet's own immortality, but Gray does not engage the pastoral model of replacement and inheritance. Instead of lauding a poet-forebear whose poetic acclaim may then be transferred to the elegist, the Romantic elegy allows the poet to prove his own worthiness

through a demonstration of melancholic and artistic genius that takes the shape of an existential meditation. Thus Gray's poem takes pains to represent the dead he mourns as his own creations, with the inclusion of so many conditional phrases and indeterminate adjectives –

*Perhaps* in this neglected spot is laid

*Some* heart once pregnant with celestial fire;

Hands that the rod of empire *might* have swayed,

*Or* wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre (45-48, italics my own)

- that the reader is constantly reminded that even the dead themselves serve as proof of the poet's imaginative capability. In this way, Gray's poem makes efficient use of the burgeoning eighteenth century culture of sympathy, imagining and identifying with the dead (literally, by the end of the poem) and allowing the reader to do the same, thus inviting a shared existential reflection and reassurance in the face of death. Unloosening existential consolation from its personal counterpart, the Romantic elegy as practiced by Gray relies on sympathy as the key qualifier for existential consolation. The poet proves his genius by demonstrating the melancholic temperament of the artist, and although readers cannot access the existential consolation that attends artistic acclaim, they can demonstrate the melancholic temperament that allows sympathetic identification. As Patrick Vincent writes, "The last three stanzas [of Gray's elegy] are intended as a consolation in which the poet's obscure death is compensated by his acceptance in Heaven and by his poetic commemoration: the poet's tear is replaced, or rather kept alive, by our sympathy as readers" (33). The old model of pastoral consolation, in which



the poet achieves both personal and existential consolation by securing his poetic  
forebear's artistic immortality and then stepping into the space he's left behind is now  
replaced by a new model, in which the reader succeeds the poet as mourner but there is  
no personal consolation to be found. As Susan Rosenbaum writes in *Professing  
Sincerity*, both melancholic suffering and sympathetic identification are key to the  
existential consolation of the Romantic elegy:

As practiced by Thomas Gray at mid-century, the elegy was defined by  
sincerity, the poet's expressions of private grief and suffering serving to  
authenticate his motive for entering the literary marketplace: inducting the  
reader into a moral community founded on sympathy for the dead (102).

The pipes that, in the pastoral, are symbolically transferred from mourned to mourner are  
thus replaced in the Romantic elegy by tears that, shed by the poet, work to display his  
melancholic temperament and artistic genius and, shed by the reader, confirm it.

Although we don't know when Griffiths read Gray's poem, she certainly did read  
it. In her elegy for Susannah Wright, who died in 1784, Griffiths notes Wright's own  
sympathetic capability, particularly her ability to sympathize with mourners:

Did suffering wound, or Death remove the friend,  
She felt the anguish of its keenest Dart;  
.....  
She pour'd the Balm, Compassionately kind  
On Human sufferings, with a healing hand,  
Thus; thro' each Period, of a lengthen'd day,

(Fulfill'd the Tender Claim, the social tye,)

“She kept the noiseless Tenor of her way.” (25-26, 31-35)

She even includes a note at the bottom of the poem to indicate that the quotation is drawn from “Gray’s Church-Yard.” But while she may have admired the imaginative identification of Gray’s poem and the sympathetic consolation offered by Wright, in her extended elegiac cycle for her mother she accepts neither. Indeed, as we shall see, though Griffitts adopts the Romantic willingness to trade on her own melancholy, she deploys her melancholy in service of personal, rather than existential, consolation. Her insistence on the effects of a particular loss and her refusal to allow sympathetic identification serve as critical interventions in this increasingly popular strain of elegy.

In one of the early elegies for her mother, Griffitts evokes the Romantic figure of the artist-mourner if only to highlight the limitations of that position. In 1758, she asserts:

My mournful lyre shall never be unstrung  
My bleeding heart shall dictate to my tongue  
Though heaven be dear – nor Earth my sorrows heed,  
My artless lines shall flow – my anxious heart shall bleed (7-10).

The metrical play here – Griffitts’s “artless” alexandrine interrupts the poem’s iambic pentameter – suggests already a critique of the posture of the melancholic poet who claims to give himself over to grief while keeping strict control of artistic construction. Later in the poem she explicitly resists this melancholic impulse, writing,

But oh forbear my tongue & stream mine eyes

Let not a doubtful murmuring thought arise  
Our God is just & wise – He knows when fit  
To wound of hear, our duty's to submit. (31-34)

What might have been evidence of a melancholic temperament that could move the poet toward existential consolation is thus redirected toward personal consolation – though Griffitts could take refuge in art, she refuses to do so, instead counseling submission to the will of god. And yet it's difficult not to hear an echo of Bradstreet's elegy for Simon - "*Let's say* He's merciful, as well as just" - in Griffitts's self-policing (italics my own, 14). Tellingly, Griffitts presents this submission not as lived experience but rather as poetic practice, figuring extended grief in terms of articulation and communication. God is here represented as a reader/listener, whose wisdom includes the boundaries of appropriate, articulated mourning. Even rebellious thoughts are represented in terms of language – “murmuring” their resistance to “our duty.” The elegist's tears may flow, but in order to provide evidence of her submission she must regulate her tongue.

Griffitts's rejection of the position of melancholic poetic genius also facilitates her critique of the circulation of sympathy within eighteenth-century elegy, for the exchange of sympathies which lies at the heart of existential consolation in these poems is also deeply associated with questions of gender. In her work tracing the history of melancholia, Juliana Schiesari argues that the position of the melancholic has a tradition as “a privileged form of male expression,” one which “legitimizes the male in his ‘excessive’ suffering” (13). Indeed, as the Romantic elegy gained traction the gendered division between the sensitive, melancholic male poet whose capacity for imaginative

identification evidenced his poetic genius and the uncontrolled female mourner grew more and more distinct. As Paula Backscheider puts it, “by appropriating melancholy as the mood of male suffering over loss and identifying it with creativity, [eighteenth century male poets] contributed to the establishment over time of gendered judgments about mourners” (227). Such associations were not limited to poetry. In *Passion Is the Gale*, her study of the rhetoric of emotion in Revolutionary Philadelphia, Nicole Eustace argues that “what seems to have determined whether a man’s tears were judged cowardly & effeminate or splendid and manly is whether they were shed for ‘private woes’ or only in response to the tears of others, that is, whether they were selfish or selfless” (247). Gray, mourning the loss of characters he himself created, might freely grieve, and in so doing prove his artistic qualifications by both demonstrating sympathetic identification and eliciting it from his readers. Yet were Griffitts to take such an authentic position within the elegy for her mother, her own tears would provide not proof of artistic capacity but rather an opportunity for others to display their own “selfless” responses. We may see, therefore, why Griffitts offers a skeptical view of artistic melancholy, instead framing her refusal to mourn in verse as evidence of the submission that will eventually lead to her reunion with her lost beloved.

Griffitts does not merely recuse herself from the posture of melancholic genius; in later poems she questions the motives and utility of such self-representation. Linking sympathy to artistry, Griffitts’s elegies tap into the newfound scrutiny of elegiac sincerity that grew with the popularity of the early Romantic elegy. Of the older pastoral model, Thomas Harrison writes, “the distinction of the elegy is measured, not primarily by the

sincerity of the poet's grief in the loss of a friend, but by his mode of giving expression to his own ideas about life" (4). Of course, pastoral elegists certainly gestured toward the depth of their feelings, but, as Patrick Vincent argues, it was not until the eighteenth-century that sincerity became a key convention of elegiac production. Quoting Alastair Fowler's description of the elegy as a poem that is "flowing, artless, sincere, unaffected, tender, pure, open," Vincent notes, "While many of these characteristics of elegy are timeless, the notion of elegy as 'unaffected' and 'tender' belonged specifically to the eighteenth century culture of sensibility" (33).

In each of the first five discrete elegies of Griffitts's cycle, she solicits sympathy from her readers. These are the only maternal elegies in which she does so, and, as we shall see in section five, Griffitts narrows the pool of potential sympathizers more with each passing year. In two of these poems, Griffitts explicitly links questions of sincerity, artistic genius, and sympathy. In 1753, she limits the number of possible sympathizers to those who have felt a similar loss. Moreover, she links their sympathy with a call for sincere mourning, recalling the possibility of the "unfeeling grief" that in "Monumental Vanity" is passed from "form to form." She calls:

Come all ye sympathizing souls and join  
Your mutual griefs and pious tears to mine  
You that have felt this stroke alone can tell  
How deep the wound how sharp ye pangs I feel  
Then weep with me and mourn ye day that gave  
My dearest best loved parent to the grave

Come every weeping muse – in sable dressed  
And paint ye mighty woe that pains my breast  
In funeral numbers and the pensive lay  
Unite together on this gloomy day  
Heedless of storms and negligent of art  
And speak the real anguish of my heart. (54-65)

Calling only upon those who have suffered a similar loss, Griffiths speaks directly to contemporary conceptions of sympathy, the “logic of literary sentimentalism,” which Elizabeth Barnes maintains

depends on the conception of sympathy as fundamentally grounded in, and bounded by, the human imagination...As Adam Smith argues in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), we can have no conception of what others feel “but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in that situation.” (4)

Restricting her pool of sympathizing mourners to those who have felt a similar loss, Griffiths troubles the idea of sympathetic identification itself, arguing that her loss is so great that readers cannot imagine or “conceive” her grief. Her argument that even those who might understand it should take care to “speak the real anguish of my heart” in terms “negligent of art” again signals anxiety about the sincerity of sympathetic identification, particularly when such identification is encoded within an elegy that might use the dead as a means to prove the melancholic genius of the artist.

The following year Griffitts again engages the relationship between sympathy and poetic production. In 1754 she suggests that she cannot adequately elegize her mother – her loss, she writes, is “beyond my tongue to speak or ken to tell” (55). In order to continue her poem, she calls upon “those that have felt it,” soliciting:

Then let these real mourning come join  
Their speechless grief and painful woe to mine  
And I can make to you ye some return  
I’ve felt ye stroke & with your song can mourn  
Such mutual sympathy may give relief  
And mitigate though never cure ye grief. (57-64)

In this passage, Griffitts lays out the uses and the limits of sympathetic identification. It may, she argues, lessen grief. It certainly allows elegy, for while her own loss leaves Griffitts speechless, she can mourn by proxy, and she hopes that making “some return” to other mourners will “mitigate...ye grief.” Yet while Griffitts may be willing to share her pain with those who have identified similar losses, allowing them access to a limited degree of consolation, the sympathetic identification she solicits here will not admit those who have not felt such losses. And, she maintains, it will not answer death.

#### *IV. Beloved Grief: The Sentimental Elegy*

Just as the early Romantic elegy focused on the melancholic grief of the poet as a qualifier for the artistic genius and sympathetic identification that might facilitate existential consolation, the funeral elegy, too, became more and more attuned to the grief

of the individual mourner in the eighteenth century. A result of the “low” elegy’s shift away from the communal mourning of the Puritan funeral elegy, this prioritization of the individual mourner resulted in an increased tolerance for more dramatic expressions of grief, and eventually led to the sentimental strain of the elegy, which would come to dominate nineteenth century elegiac production, and which John Draper dismisses as the terrain of “the women, the middle classes, and the provincials” (302).

Although the sentimental elegy would not reach its American heyday until after Griffitts’s death, the extended mourning she displays in her elegiac cycle for her mother, her emphasis on lament (particularly in the early poems) and her struggle with consolation are characteristic of that subgenre. While many of the elegies published in contemporary newspapers do follow Franklin’s formula, Griffitts was by no means the only poet resisting it. In England, already, the sentimental elegy was quite popular. Writing of Griffitts’s British counterparts, Ann Mellor maintains that, “[t]he great majority of female elegists between 1660 and 1834 endorse intuitive grieving, affirming the necessity of passionate and repeated weeping” (447). Although few examples of sentimental elegies had been published in Colonial newspapers by the mid seventeenth-century, they were being written and circulated in America as well. Annis Boudinot Stockton, for example, was a member of Griffitts’s literary circle who composed no fewer than seven elegies for her husband (Cavitch 62). Published as an addendum to his funeral sermon in 1781, “An Elegy Sacred to the Memory of Richard Stockton, Esqur.,” closes with a refusal of consolation and solicitation of sympathy that are typically sentimental:



Goddess of sorrow! tune each mournful air;  
Let all things pay the tributary tear;  
For worth like his demands this heart-felt grief,  
And tears alone can yield a sad relief. (54-57)

And Ann Eliza Bleeker, whose poems were published posthumously by her daughter in 1793, mourns the loss of her child by calling down yet more grief, writing

The idol of my soul was torn away  
Her spirit fled and left me ghastly clay!  
Then-then my soul rejected all relief,  
Comfort I wish'd not for, I lov'd my grief. (30-33)

This rejection of easy comfort might prompt us to read her elegy as one influenced by Bradstreet, who honors her lost grandchildren by resisting the standard consolatory mechanics of Puritan funeral elegy that would use her loss as a means to communal existential consolation without addressing her own mourning. But Bleeker's assertion that she "lov'd" her sadness troubles such a reading, aligning her instead with the sentimental elegists of the nineteenth century whose extravagant grief refuses any answer. Like contemporary theorists of productive melancholia, Celeste Schenck suggests that such refusal is a moral stance, that women poets in general refuse consolation as a way of rebuking the pastoral model of competition and replacement:

In her subversion of the elegiac, the female elegist not only deconstructs these ahistorical, apolitical, and essentially mythic structures (elegy as deferral of the elegist's own death), she replaces them with connective

tissue, fleshy bonds; she protests the final separation by insisting upon not only the difficulty of severing substantial relations, but the potential for achieving identity by preserving those very relations. (27)

Schenck argues that, in practice, this connection takes the form of “refusal of consolation,” that “mourning without end is perhaps the female elegist’s most characteristic subversion of the masculine elegiac” (24).

Such a reading might suggest that these poets find personal consolation by insisting upon the value of their lost beloveds, that their elegiac practice is both inspired and answered by such desire. Yet even if we adapt the argument to apply only to the sentimental elegy, thus avoiding historicist objections about the various strains of the genre and feminist objections to the essentialist claim that all women mourn the same way, such a reading fails to account for the twofold nature of elegiac consolation, and for poets like Griffiths, whose fifty years of elegiac verse provide ample evidence of the significance of her loss even as they move her toward personal consolation.

The question of consolation returns us to Bleeker’s characteristically sentimental claim that she “lov’d” her grief. In fact, as Allison Giffen points out in her study of the elegy, Bleeker explicitly and emphatically rejects any resolution to her mourning. She brings other speakers into the poem to offer her the kind of consolation found in Franklin’s “recipe”:

Bleeker supplies a model of the behavior of a virtuous Christian woman in the expostulations of the women. Theirs is a soporific litany of conventional images and platitudes: a virtuous woman must exhibit self-

discipline and subdue her passion; she must “bear each heavy cross” with unselfish “Christian fortitude.” (228)

And her response is to refuse such counsel – not on the grounds that she is weak or incapable of submitting to the will of god, but rather because such suggestions display what she characterizes as an inhuman lack of sympathy:

“Go!” cried I raging, “stoic bosoms go  
“Whose hearts vibrate not to the sound of woe;  
“Go from the sweet society of men,  
“Seek some unfeeling tyger’s savage den,  
“There calm- alone – of resignation preach. (46-50)

Bleeker’s poem is remarkable in that it dramatizes her rejection of personal consolation, explicitly justifying her extended mourning by suggesting that it is evidence of a feeling heart, and representing acceptance of personal consolation as evidence to the contrary.

While Griffiths does ultimately resign herself to exactly those consolations that Bleeker resists, the narrative presented in her filial elegiac cycle – of a mourner who struggles, but ultimately achieves, submission and thus prepares for a reunion with her lost beloved – is paradoxically facilitated by her adoption of elements of the sentimental elegy. In her repeated assertions of her own suffering, Griffiths justifies her difficulty with submission and makes that submission itself more valuable. Even the extended nature of her grief, a hallmark of the sentimental elegy, becomes a qualifier for her personal consolation. Throughout her elegiac cycle, Griffiths represents her painful life-as-mourner as a period of pain, one which will ultimately prove her worthiness to be

admitted to heaven and reunited with her mother. Soon after her mother's death, she began characterizing earthly life as a "captive state" and herself a "prisoner."<sup>40</sup> In 1766, she first suggests that suffering itself might lend value to her submission, metaphorizing life as "a desert scene/ A rough probation marked for me" (42-43). In 1778, she makes the connection between her suffering and reunion clear, rejoicing at the thought of the time "When mercy bids probations labors close/ Again Great God, the Parent friend restore" (37-38). She again characterizes life as "probation" in 1782 and 1783 and that year once more ties release to reunion:

Grant great God – to grasp this sacred prize,  
When life's Probationary Race is run,  
To meet my Darling – in her native skies,  
And for the Rest, thy Holy will be done. (41-44)

These metaphors emphasize the depth of Griffitts's pain in a way that signal the importance of her loss. Yet by insisting on her hard-won personal consolation, by representing reunion as the "prize" that will reward her submission, Griffitts engages elements of both Puritan funeral elegy and its sentimental successor without accepting the existential consolation of either. In prioritizing personal consolation, Griffitts avoids sentimental profit from her loss. As Giffen argues, the position of inconsolable mourner may easily become an authorizing stance for women poets. Bleeker, she suggests,

finds her position as mourning mother in some ways empowering. The  
experience of personal loss and grief alienates the poet, placing her on the

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<sup>40</sup> Griffitts invokes captivity three times, in 1765 (11), 1772 (50), and 1796 (46). She refers to herself as a prisoner in 1751 (76), 1761 (39), 1764 (1), 1765 (63), and 1792 (23).

margins of society where she is relieved to some degree of the pressures of social and literary convention. In this borderland the woman poet may more readily articulate desire and define herself as speaking subject. (224)

In my next chapter, on Phillis Wheatley, I'll explore further the ways that such identification may work to empower, and restrict, women poets. First, however we should look to the way that the sentimental elegy, like its Romantic counterpart, presents the mourner as one who both extends and invites sympathy, allowing the identification between reader and poet that, while it does little to address the particular grief of the elegist, does work to facilitate existential consolation for both the poet and for her readers.

While the position of isolated mourner allows the poet to step back from society, it also encourages readerly admiration and even identification. The great, unanswered pain of the elegist is displayed as evidence of equally great feeling. Perhaps responding to the questions of sincerity that attend all eighteenth century elegy, Mellor suggests that, for English women poets, the refusal of personal consolation is key to facilitating its existential counterpart. Like Bleeker, these poets might display their grief as evidence of their goodness: "Such an overt emotional response, they could claim, is a fundamental dimension of sensibility, that capacity to feel intensely that is everywhere associated with moral compassion and altruistic benevolence in 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and culture" (447). Calling for sympathy, inconsolable mourners offer their readers an opportunity to display similar humanity. And in America, particularly during and after the revolution, such opportunities took on a new significance.

Although much of the work on early American sentiment, sympathy, and citizenship focuses on the sentimental novel rather than poetry, recent theories about the relationship between mourning, grief, and sympathy in Revolutionary America can shed light on Griffitts's repeated refusals of sympathetic identification. Studies by Elizabeth Barnes, Julia Stern, Julie Ellison, and Peter Coviello argue that grief and sympathy serve as important unifying structures of feeling following the fractures and losses of the Revolutionary war. Such theories, Coviello writes,

envision a late eighteenth-century world in which the terrors of revolution, the pain of revolutionary rupture, and anxieties over national cohesion all contribute to the making of a civic atmosphere in which affect figures less as a specter to be banished than as an elemental social fact, whose potential uses must, accordingly, be considered and cultivated. (442)

Elizabeth Barnes puts the matter more bluntly, arguing that “sympathy was to be the building block of a democratic nation” (443).

It's certainly undeniable that the Revolution was followed by an increase of the rhetoric of sympathy in Griffitts's Philadelphia. Nicole Eustace traces the use of the word “sympathy” in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* between 1728 and 1800 and finds that the frequency of its occurrence is almost exactly inverse to Griffitts's deployment of it. Between 1751 and 1765, for example, when Griffitts engaged sympathy most directly in her elegies, the word accounted for only 4.5% of all “words for shared feeling” in the *Gazette*. Between 1766-1783, as Griffitts's poems increasingly referred to the cutting of earthly ties, “sympathy” accounted for 13.8% of such terms. And between 1784-1800, as

Griffitts's elegies shifted to poems of acceptance and resignation, even gratitude that she was no longer linked to earth, "sympathy" accounted for 25.7% of words of shared feelings.

This increased rhetoric of sympathy reflects a shift in elegiac practice that attended the war. As Max Cavitch notes, in Revolutionary America, the elegy again became an important site for communal mourning.

From the start of the Revolutionary War to the end of the century, the deaths of soldiers, patriot noncombatants, illustrious citizens, and noncitizen subjects had inspired a wealth of elegies that reflected back to their audience various images of a country in tears. Such idealizing images encouraged members of what was in reality a riven and uncertain populace to understand themselves as representatives of a nationally unified mourning subject. They exhorted a people to weep themselves into being. (80-81)

Instead of preserving a community, as the Puritan funeral elegy worked to do, the American elegy at the turn of the century sought to establish community through sympathetic mourning. In fact, the extended elegiac grief displayed by both Bleeker and Stockton eventually is eventually resolved by a redirection of energy toward national sympathetic identifications.<sup>41</sup> In the following chapter I'll further explore the limits of this sympathetic community, particularly in regard to cross-racial identifications. But for

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<sup>41</sup> See Max Cavitch's reading of Stockton's elegy in *American Elegy*, 62-70 and Ellison's reading of Bleeker in *Cato's Tears* 125-136.

the moment, I'd like to examine the operations of sympathy in relation to white women like Hannah Griffitts.

In fact, Griffitts herself contributed to the elegiac outpouring that accompanied the war. Copied into *Martha Milcah Moore's Book*, her poem "The Sympathetic Scene," which opens

In the sad Chambers of retir'd Distress

The Scenes of speechless Woe, where Widows mourn

The tender Husband lost – where Orphans weep - (1-4)

makes no attempt to mask its baldly sentimental calls for sympathetic identification.

Although the poem locates itself in the latter half of its title - "wrote August 31<sup>st</sup> 1776 – occasioned by the unnatural Contest at Long Island Aug. 27<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup>" – as a Revolutionary war elegy, no specific dead are named. And though Griffitts calls up sisters and brothers, husbands and fathers, and offers "to share my neighbors' Grief/ Give Sigh for Sigh, & mingle Tears with Tears," even in this poem she recognizes that "Words are vain," and "ev'n Friendship's soothing Voice/ Has lost its Calm, in Woundings like to yours" (9-10, 7-18). Twenty lines into the eighty-line poem, she counsels the mourners to turn to god. As the poem continues, it becomes clear why Griffitts continues to evoke the pain of the survivors despite the fact that she recognizes the limits of her own sympathy. Ultimately, the poem becomes an argument that sympathy itself may hasten the end to the war. In "A Sympathetic Scene," then, Griffitts traces the political potential of sympathy, hoping that by encouraging readers to weep with those widowed and orphaned by war, they might prevent more women and children from being widowed and



orphaned. But while Griffitts's trade on the deaths of the unnamed (but real) soldiers who died at the Battle of Long Island functions as an ethical protest of their deaths, her evocation of sympathy at the death of her mother could serve no such function.

This is not to suggest that Griffitts's elegy for her mother could not have provoked a sympathetic response. As the mass pilgrimages to the grave of the fictional Charlotte Temple attest, sympathy did not require a war hero or even a real object of identification in order to create what Julia Stern describes as "a democratic body of mourners, all bound by 'fellow feeling'" (116). But as Stern notes in her essay "Plights of Feeling," these bodies are frequently formed through the destruction of another (female) body. To engage a sympathetic response, Griffitts would have to position herself as inconsolable mourner. Certainly the posture would be familiar to those who read her poems: even the communal grief that attended figures of national loss was frequently mediated through mourning female survivors. Explaining the important symbolic role women played in preserving the memory of Revolutionary War heroes, Sarah Purcell writes, "they appear in public culture as the mourning widows, mothers, sisters, and betrothed virgins whose tears would remain as examples to the nation of their heroes' virtue" (37). Nicole Eustace puts the matter more bluntly: "People could not possibly seek to share in others' feelings if there were none to share, so certain cultural practices encouraged grief insofar as it provided fodder for sympathy" (291). Denying sympathetic identifications predicated on a display of her own grief, Hannah Griffitts,

like Bradstreet before her, refuses to trade her own loss for the existential comfort of the community.<sup>42</sup>

V. *No Earthly Ties: Griffitts's Radical Sympathy*

In her reading of Griffitts's filial elegiac cycle, Susan Stabile argues that "Because elegiac poetry requires sympathy, Griffitts solicits inspiration from the female mourners, who effectively become her Muses" (186). While her close reading includes compelling arguments about the ways that Griffitts suggests a continued union with her mother throughout the cycle, it also argues that this union, these "remains," are comprised of more than mother and daughter.

Sending copies of her elegies to intimate friends, Griffitts incorporates the mourners into the sympathetic bond she shared exclusively with her mother. Death's singular body (i.e. Griffitts as the body, her mother as the soul) thus becomes a collective body of grief. Left behind by death, the friends, too, are part of the mother's remains. (186)

While such a reading offers a useful description of eighteenth century mourning practice, it becomes problematic when applied to poetic practice. For example, Stabile quotes

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<sup>42</sup> Although Griffitts did identify as a Whig during the war, her resistance to such national projects may also be linked to her Quakerism, which counseled a submission to authority evidenced in her elegiac cycle and which resisted Paine's sense of "natural" authority. Linda Kerber suggests that, for Quaker women, the early Republic may have seemed like a step away from freedom: "In a culture in which churches quite literally were the only institutions which welcomed women, to support a secularizing revolution demanded a substantial degree of selflessness" ("Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres," 584). This framework would provide a useful way of understanding Griffitts's 1785 poem "On the Glorious Fourth," an ironic title for a date she suggests is "The scene for sad disasters/ Where all the mighty gains we see/ With all their Boasted liberty/ Is only – change of masters" (3-6).

several passages from the early elegies that seem to back her argument. In her poem of 1751, for example, Griffitts calls:

Come, all the Sacred Mourners – Join with me.  
In this my Grief – and emit your Gushing Tears,  
Your Pious Tears with mine – and help to bear,  
My weight of woe – this sympathetick kindness,  
Shall meet a Due Return of Love – from me. (24-29)

Yet the rest of the poem troubles a reading of the “Sacred Mourners” as Griffitts’s readers and fellow poets. Only twelve lines after the passage Stabile quotes, Griffitts figures herself as a singular mourner whose loss

Deprived me of this blessing left me here  
A stranger all alone – a real orphan  
To all ye swarming ill of life a prey  
A helpless prey no friend to calm my grief (37-40)

We know that some of her friends abandoned Griffitts after she was forced to live with her brother, and in this very poem she references the “slights of friends – to injuries of foes/Frowns of the world, contempt of them with whom/I once was equal,” concluding that, although such losses pale in comparison to the loss of her mother, “This was hard to bear” (43-45). Yet she still had her sister Mary at least, and perhaps by the time she was writing this poem had already arranged for the two of them to go and live with their Uncle Isaac Norris. My argument, then, is not that Griffitts *was* isolated, but rather that she represented herself as such in her poems. And while these later passages contradict

but don't negate the passage quoted by Stabile, I believe that we may read the "sacred mourners" invoked by Griffitts not as friends or readers but rather as personifications of time and nature. Immediately preceding the lines Stabile quotes, Griffitts personifies February the thirteenth, the date on which her mother died, and the date of the poem's composition, calling on the "dark unholy day" to

wear thy sable weeds of blackest hue  
Be clothed with grief and covered over with sadness.  
No smiles be ever seen on thee to cheer  
The woe of mortals or the face of nature. (16-18)

She then turns to the sun, asking it to "Look not...from thy meridian height/ Nor bless the nations, with thy cheering beam" (19-20). Next she solicits the moon: "Nor evening Cynthia smile with borrowed rays/ smile through the gloom nor guild the face of night" (21-22). Griffitts closes this personified roll-call with an exhortation that leads directly into the passage Stabile quotes:

Let universal sadness reign around  
And nature mourn with me  
Come all ye sacred mourners – join with me. (23-25)

Instead of soliciting the sympathy of her readers or fellow-poets, I argue that Griffitts enacts a "radical sympathy" with her mother, one that explicitly refuses the sympathetic identification that, in both sentimental and in Romantic elegies, serves to move poet and reader toward existential consolation. This refusal of sympathetic identification, I argue, offers a rebuke and critique of the gendered valences of melancholic genius and

sympathetic identification. More importantly, it facilitates Griffitts's own progression toward reunion and personal consolation.

While Griffitts's first poem does not enlist the sympathy of readers, each of her first five elegies represents sympathy as a possibility for providing consolation, or at least for ameliorating grief. It is worth noting that these are the only elegies that posit sympathy as a possible answer to loss, and that as the cycle progresses we find Griffitts refining her idea of who might be capable of providing adequate sympathy. In 1751, as we've seen, she calls on the conventional pastoral elegiac forces of muse and nature, although later in the same poem she suggests that neither may provide the necessary "balm." In 1752, she makes her most inclusive bid for sympathy. In a figuration that recalls Bleeker's suggestion of sympathy as the mark of a humane person, she suggests that her poem will

To soul humane the bitter stroke reveal  
And tell to them of anguish that I feel  
Reviewing of my loss  
They may assist my soul the weight to bear  
Approve my grief & join the friendly tear  
With those I've shed upon this tender theme  
And flow forever in a boundless stream. (25-31)

In 1753 and 1754, her elegies link sympathy, artistic production, and sincerity in ways we've already explored, and Griffitts engages sympathy positively only once more. The following year, she calls upon "the feeling love and sympathetic care" of her reader,

but she directs the poem to her Aunt Elizabeth Norris, her mother's sister and one who certainly shares her particular loss (3). After this string of elegies in which Griffitts engages both the possibilities and the limits of sympathetic identification, she does not mention sympathy for a full decade. When she does return to it, in her elegy of 1765, Griffitts characterizes sympathetic identification as something of value, something her readers want from her. She does not solicit but rather refuses bids for sympathy, arguing that "none, but such as weep their darling gone/ Can feel the deep extensive stroke I mourn" (44-45). This rejection differs significantly from Bleeker's, for Griffitts is explicitly refusing not consolation (as we've seen, she in fact invites the very assertions that Bleeker finds so offensive) but rather a sympathetic identification based in imagination. Such losses as hers, Griffitts suggests, cannot be accessed unless they've been felt firsthand. The following year, Griffitts eschews the possibility of sympathy entirely, ironically identifying the resulting isolation as both a cause and effect of grief: "No sympathetic soul I feel," she writes, "To share my grief or dry my tears" (25-26).

While one effect of this refusal of sympathy is an extension of her mourning, it also serves to tie Griffitts more closely to her mother. In 1753, she addresses Mary Norris Griffitts directly, casting her as the only "friend" from whom she might have drawn sympathy:

Now has thou left me in this vale below  
With grief companion and a prey to woe  
Since thou art gone I seem to stand alone  
For sorrow now to shoot her darts upon

No friend to counsel comfort or provide

No eye to pity nor no hand to guide. (72-77)

Griffitts emphasizes this connection in her elegies of 1762 and 1765, implicitly figuring her mother as a spiritual or heavenly friend when she tells her that “nature’s friends withdrew” and maintains “No friend I have on earth that can revive/ My fainting hope & bid the mourner live.” (1765, 17-18)

In fact, as the elegiac cycle progresses, the sympathy that links Griffitts with her mother grows stronger as the poet isolates herself more and more from those on earth who might sympathize with her. The following passage from 1753 provides a typical example, in which Griffitts laments, “I have no darling now my parent’s gone/ By this deep wound this liberating stroke/ Each tie is loosened and my bands are broke” (30-31). The social, affective “ties” that enable sympathy and bind Griffitts to her readers and fellow poets are repeatedly invoked and severed throughout the elegiac cycle. In 1757, Griffitts says that “since on this day – I felt the deadly stroke/ Dissolved each tie - & every band was broke”(11-12). Eight years later, in 1765, she represents herself as “Loose ...from every mortal tie,” and eight years after that, she suggests that it was

The just chastising hand of heaven

That cut each band below

This work is done each human tie

Each fond connection dear

No more attracts my weeping eye

To fix its prospects here. (“1765” 9, “1773” 27-32)

Griffitts's refusals of sympathy thus serve three purposes. First, they draw attention to the sympathetic exchange at the heart of eighteenth century elegy. Secondly, they facilitate the personal consolation that arrives with heavenly reunion. By representing herself as the isolated victim of extended grief, Griffitts draws on the sentimental elegy's formulation of mourner-as-sufferer, a position that both emphasizes the value of the woman she's lost and that makes her submission itself more meaningful and thus more likely to earn her admission to the heavenly kingdom where her mother waits. Finally, her rejections of sympathy allow Griffitts to provide evidence of this resignation. Once she has cut all of the earthly bonds that would allow sympathetic identification, she is free to maintain, as she does in her elegy of 1798:

Now weaned from earth alone my God to thee  
These once beloved gifts I would resign  
And Oh may all my powers devoted be  
To bow, subjected to the will divine  
If favored yet, on life's immortal clime  
"In thee" to meet these dear loved ties again  
Beyond the stroke of death, the waste of time  
And all the dread of separating pain. (37-44)

I opened this chapter by proposing that reading Hannah Griffitts's poems as dislocations and revisions of elegiac codes and their underlying systems of consolatory exchange would help us better understand her work as a sophisticated engagement with the genre of elegy. And I want to return to the idea of personal consolation, and the



tension between poetic and mourning practice in these poems. While Griffitts's ultimate submission to the will of god certainly functions in these poems as an answer to her personal grief, there is no escaping the reality that she spent a lifetime mourning in verse. In their tension between resignation and mourning, between actual mourning and its representation, Griffitts's poems draw our attention to the limitations of a critical framework that divides elegies into those that accept consolation and those that refuse it. I want to close by turning to one final set of images that Griffitts threads through the poems, images that show Griffitts's own engagement with the distance between mourning and elegizing. Like many other aspects of her elegiac practice, they are at once conventional and surprising, consolatory and suspicious of the capacity of the elegy to console.

In 1753, the poem in which Griffitts calls on her "muses," she asks them to "paint ye mighty woe that pains my breast/ In funeral numbers and the pensive lay" (61-62). Throughout the elegiac cycle, she continues to call on images of songs and singing. Occasionally, as in her 1758 reference to a "mournful lyre," they are oblique (7). Most often, as in 1757, 1761, 1762, 1767, 1769, 1775, and 1778, they take the form of songs of praise that she will offer once she is reunited with her mother on the "celestial shore." Griffitts looks forward to a heaven "Where in our mutual joy and mutual praise/ with embodied mind, the exulting song shall raise," to a time "When I shall see my father's face/ and loud the song of triumph raise/ Again the bosom-friend embrace" ("1761" 49-50, "1769" 61-63). She asks god to

Admit the mourner to thy rest

(the dear lost joy restore)

To join the immortal song of praise

On Canaan's blissful shore. ("1775" 57-60)

Griffitts's last engagement with song arrives in the 1794 elegy, in which she represents acceptance as already accomplished, and thanks god that his love "did still sufficient for the trial prove" (22). After imagining a reunion with her mother and sister, "gifts perfected and restored," Griffitts turns to her usual image of herself amid a chorus of angels, and "there with thy flock our joyful tribute raise" (37, 39). But unlike many of her other poems, this one does not close with the image of the angelic choir. Griffitts continues:

Oh glorious hail immortal and divine

Beyond the increase of corn, and oil, and wine

Perfected bliss to which the balm below

Is unsubstantial vanity and show.

But ideas fail nor language can convey

The life of God in everlasting day (42-46).

With the inclusion of these lines, after forty-four years of elegies, Griffitts both reinforces the consolatory force of the elegiac cycle, effectively transforming her "funeral lay" into a "song of praise" and she undercuts that force by arguing that the latter is a poem that cannot be written. It's no surprise, then, that she would continue to write elegies for another nine years, asserting again and again her acceptance and resignation in the face of a loss she can't stop writing.

## *Chapter Four*

### **Making Friends with Death: Melancholic Anger in Phillis Wheatley's Infant Elegies**

The gravestones in the burying ground at King's Chapel date to 1658, within twenty years of Anne Bradstreet's arrival in America on the *Arabella* (Yalom 53). The oldest cemetery in Boston, the burying ground testifies to the changes in American attitudes toward death and memorialization that took place over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Walking the paths that cut through the graveyard, one can watch the images on the headstones change, the skulls and crossbones carved above the names and dates plumping out, growing curls and wings, transforming from death's heads to cherubs, from stark reminders that we all must die to comforting images of the angels who will greet us when we do.<sup>43</sup> One of the later headstones featuring a *memento mori* carving marks the grave of two siblings, William W. and Hannah Gordon. Both were heartbreakingly young – William, the headstone tells us, was three years and nine months old when he died on July 6 of 1789. His sister, only two weeks old, had died on the last day of the year in 1787. Beneath their names is carved a poem:

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<sup>43</sup> David Stannard points out this trend in New England graveyards more generally in his excellent *The Puritan Way of Death*, 157-161.

Through airy roads they wing their infant flight  
From dark abodes to fair ethereal light  
Th'enraptured innocent has wing'd their way  
To purer regions of celestial day  
The angels view them with delight unknown,  
Prest their soft hands and seat them on their throne  
Thrice welcome thou th'enraptured babe replies  
Thanks to our god who snatch'd us to the skies.<sup>44</sup>

As the shifts from a plural subject to the singular “innocent” or “babe” indicate, the lines carved into the tombstone of the Gordon children were not written for them. In fact they are drawn from two separate poems, “On the Death of a Young Lady, 5 Years of Age,” and “A Funeral Elegy for C.E., an Infant,” elegies published in Phillis Wheatley’s 1773 book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.<sup>45</sup>

In this chapter, I’ll look to Wheatley’s elegy for C.E., as well as two of her other infant elegies, to show how these poems, like the graveyard itself, engage both the austere tradition of Puritan mourning practices and the more indulgent sentimental tradition of the late eighteenth century. Although the carefully selected lines on the Gordon tombstone offer the images of grateful children redeemed to heaven that lead critics like Mukhtar Ali Isani to read Wheatley’s elegies as “poems of solace,” these poems offer anything but comfort (210). Drawing on the Puritan funeral and the

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<sup>44</sup> My own transcription.

<sup>45</sup> Although I could find no account of a direct relationship between Wheatley herself and the Gordon family, Nathaniel Wheatley, son of Susannah and John, kept a pew at King’s Chapel, where James Gordon, possible father of Hannah and William, was Warden of the Chapel (Foote, 111).

sentimental elegiac traditions, Wheatley creates poems that offer neither existential nor personal consolation, ultimately encouraging both a separation from the dead and mourning without end. In her infant elegies, Wheatley speaks for the living as well as the dead, engaging sympathetic identification to demonstrate the limits of sympathy, and critiquing a system of cross-racial identifications and exchanges that expects her to mobilize her own losses in service of others' grief. Ultimately, I argue, these poems stand apart from her larger body of elegiac work; like modern anti-elegies they are poems of rupture rather than attachment, poems that direct anger toward both mourner and lost subject, poems that exacerbate rather than relieve grief and, in so doing, suggest that there are some losses from which we cannot recover.

*I. No More with Joy: Melancholia and Elegy*

The question of melancholia is a difficult one, particularly in regard to women's elegy. It is tempting to suggest that all elegies that promote attachment are melancholic, yet as we shall see, melancholia is characterized by more than just a refusal to let go of the dead. Indeed, as Freud represents it, this refusal is merely the first step. He famously presents melancholia as a "pathological" alternative to mourning, in which the mourner, instead of using the anger that attends a loss to disconnect him- or herself from the lost beloved, instead turns that anger inward and begins masochistically attacking the part of his or her own ego that has identified with the object of mourning. Yet this self-violence, which Freud maintains is the hallmark of melancholia, is certainly not present in all elegies that refuse to break with a loved one. Furthermore, as Ramazani points out, while the modern anti-elegy may frequently question the possibility or desirability of

consolation, it is not necessarily a poem of attachment. Writing specifically about elegies by women, he argues that

[a]n essentialist model of “female elegy” that overemphasizes “continuity” with precursors and with the dead risks blurring the historic consequences of Plath’s feminist revolt and that of her generation. Ever since Plath wrote her last elegies of violent separation and rupture, American women poets like Sexton, Rich, Wakoski, Kumin, Kizer, and Olds have been more than willing to use the genre to exorcize, slough, divorce, defame, even annihilate the dead. (263)

To accommodate these ruptures, Ramazani adapts the Freudian definition of melancholia. In place of a “pathological” psychological state rooted in an inability to relinquish the dead beloved, Ramazani suggests that we use the term to characterize “mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent” (4). His reading of Sylvia Plath is particularly illustrative:

Plath more than any of her forebears intensifies the mourner’s aggression toward the dead, summoning a violent anger that earlier elegists had channeled into homosocial bonding, professional competition, and wars of patrilineal succession. She uses the elegy “to express anger creatively”: “Fury,” she observes of her writing, “flows out into the figures of the letters.” (*Daddy* 273, 256). While elegists like Milton and Shelley had lashed out against nature, deities, and third parties, and while Jonson,

Dryden, and Swinbourne had betrayed competitive friction with the dead,

Plath extracts and magnifies the elegy's potential aggression. (262)

As anyone whose read Plath's "Daddy" can attest, she was indeed a master of deploying anger, and Ramazani deftly illustrates how, over the course of her career, she shifted the target of this anger from herself as mourner to the object of her mourning. Readers of "Daddy" are likely to recall its memorable close: as in Bradstreet's elegy for Sidney, the poet comes to see that the elegy is insufficiently equipped to provide her with consolation. Instead of turning to her fellow poets, however, Plath directs her closing line to the subject of her poem: "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through." In this one sentence we see how radically Plath has intervened in a genre whose conventions rely on praise of the dead. But to Ramazani's list of poets whose engagement of elegiac anger preceded (and perhaps enabled) Plath's own, I would add another poet, one certainly more restrained than Plath but one who, like her and unlike the series of male elegists listed above, contained her melancholic aggression within the closed unit of mourner, elegist, and elegized: Phillis Wheatley.

One of the difficulties of discussing melancholia is that the term is so popular that it has come to stand for several different, and frequently oppositional, affective states. In fact, a scholarly fascination with melancholia has cycled in and out of favor since at least the fifteenth century. As Juliana Schiesari notes, "the prominence of the discourse of melancholia [points to] a tradition inaugurated by the Renaissance, refined by the Enlightenment, flaunted by Romanticism [and] fetishized by the Decadents" (2). We might credit the resilience with which melancholia repeatedly comes into fashion to the

fact that, until nearly the twentieth century, the term served to describe any one of a number of affective states. “For most of its history,” Jennifer Radden writes, “What today seem to be distinct and incompatible senses of melancholia coexisted” (4). As we’ve seen in our study of Gray, in Wheatley’s own time melancholia would have been associated with deep feeling and artistic genius. Ever since Freud’s attempt to pin down its psychic process in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” however, melancholia has primarily been read as a reaction to loss that is characterized by a refusal to relinquish the lost object of desire and a concomitant self-torture.

More recently, scholars like David Eng, Shinhee Han and Anne Anlin Cheng have adapted the term to address and discuss the process of racialization. They locate the appeal of melancholia in its ability to provide a way to talk about the damage of racism without labeling those who suffer its effects as inherently damaged. Theorists of racial melancholia suggest that the process of racialization is a double-edged sword, equally damaging to both dominant white identity and to the racialized other. By framing melancholia as a (potentially damaging) process rather than a state of (damaged) being, these theories of racial melancholia shift our focus to the social causes of racial grief. For the racialized subject, Cheng argues, melancholia becomes “both a *sign* of rejection and a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection” (20). The ambivalence characteristic of melancholia is in this case evidence not of self-loathing but of resentment toward the dominant social order. Anger is provoked by the “debased value” of the racialized subject, and shame is a result of “the social message that there is no place for such anger and grief, which must go into hiding” (18). Eng and Han agree, suggesting that though



this ambivalence “threaten[s] the ego’s stability, we do not imagine that this threat is the result of some ontological tendency on the part of the melancholic; it is a *social* threat. Ambivalence, rage, and anger are the internalized refractions of an ecology of whiteness bent on the obliteration of cherished minority subjectivities” (365). Although Wheatley’s elegies can, and have, been read through any of these lenses, given the poetic concerns of this project, when I use the term “melancholic,” I will use it in the sense that Ramazani uses it to describe the modern anti-elegy: to describe poems that “giv[e] utterance to the wayward and contradictory impulses of grief,” that refuse consolation *and* connection, that revel in loss even as they present mourning that is “violent, unrestrained, and ambivalent” (*Poetry of Mourning* 6).<sup>46</sup>

## II. *The Life of the Afric Muse*

Phillis Wheatley was born around 1753 on the west coast of Africa. Like everything else about her life before she was kidnapped by slave traders, the year of her birth is a historical uncertainty. We know that on July 11, 1761, she arrived in Boston. Sickly, wrapped only in a bit of carpet, she was bought by the wife of a Boston merchant, Susannah Wheatley, who called her “Phillis” after the slave ship that brought her through the middle passage. Because she was missing her two front teeth, the Wheatleys estimated her age to be around seven years old (*Carretta Writings* 1). Recent scholarship

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<sup>46</sup> For a reading of Wheatley’s melancholia in terms of proto-Romantic genius, see Astrid Franke, “Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse.” For a reading of Northern family slavery through the lens of racial melancholia, see Jennifer Thorn, “Phillis Wheatley’s Ghosts: The Racial Melancholy of New England Protestants.” Thorn extends her reading from Wheatley’s life to her elegies “To a Clergyman” and “To the Rev. Mr. Pitkin on the Death of his Lady,” arguing that the figure of the muse allows Wheatley multiple points of identification within these poems.

has suggested that Wheatley was of the Fulani peoples, but if she knew this she never shared the name with anyone (Shields 100). An early biography written by one of the Wheatley descendants asserts that her only memory of her former home was of her mother performing a morning libation, possibly a ritual of worship to the sun. There are also stories, possibly apocryphal, of young Phillis drawing strange symbols on the walls, perhaps evidence of literacy unrecognized by those around her. By all accounts, she was a brilliant child, and within sixteen months of her arrival she could read and write in English. Instructed in English, classical literature, and some Latin by Susannah's daughter Mary Wheatley, Phillis quickly outgrew her tutelage and was then probably encouraged in her studies by Mather Byles, a neighbor of the Wheatleys (Shields 82). From his library, she may have gained the familiarity with Pope, Milton, Shenstone, Horace, Virgil, Ovid, Terence, and Homer we see evidenced in her poems and letters. Among these volumes she may also have come across the works of Anne Bradstreet; Byles had inherited his grandfather Cotton Mather's collection (Carretta *Biography* 45).

By the age of twelve, Wheatley was already writing poems, and in 1767 she published her first poem "On Messrs Hussey and Coffin," in the *Newport Mercury* (65). While this poem provides a narrative account of a maritime adventure, it was for her elegies that she, and through her the Wheatley family, soon became famous. As Jennifer Thorn notes, accounts of the relationship between Phillis and the Wheatley family tend to be described in the most generous of terms, but for all of the professed affection on both sides, Wheatley was a slave, and writing was a duty (78). It may have proved a duty she enjoyed, but it was work that profited the Wheatley family nonetheless, perhaps even

encouraging a visit from the preacher George Whitefield. Whitefield, one of the prominent figures of the Great Awakening, had visited Boston four times to preach at Wheatley's Old South Church, and it's likely that she saw him preach at least once before his death in 1770 (46). In 1771, Wheatley published "An Elegiac Poem on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Late Reverent and Pious George Whitefield." Due in part to his own popularity, in part to Wheatley's unique position as an enslaved African poet (a member of one of the groups to whom Whitefield particularly preached) and in part to the incredible popularity of the genre, Wheatley's elegy for Whitefield was an immediate success. The poem was published as a broadside in Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and London, and it earned Wheatley supporters on both sides of the Atlantic, not least among them the Countess of Hastings, to whom Whitefield was chaplain and Wheatley addressed her elegy (78).

In 1772, bolstered by the success of the Whitefield elegy, Wheatley (with the support of Susannah) began soliciting subscriptions for an edition of her work in the *Boston Censor* (Robinson 21). Yet despite the popularity of her broadside, she could not assemble the necessary support in America. However, Susanna found a home for Wheatley's poems with the London printer Archibald Bell, who generally published religious texts but agreed to issue Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* on the condition that she procure a statement of authenticity from prominent Bostonians (37). Like Bradstreet's collection, Wheatley's was prefaced with a letter "to the Publick" insuring that the work was her own.

In Joanna Brooks's article "Our Phillis, Ourselves," Brooks tries to imagine the process by which Wheatley procured this letter. Indeed, it has become such a part of the Wheatley lore that the young poet was put on trial to prove her work her own that visitors to the Old South Church that Wheatley attended can now find, in the gift shop, a children's book called *Phillis's Big Test*, which tells the story of Wheatley's famous interrogation. But Brooks offers an alternate story, drawing from letters to suggest that Wheatley herself set up the attestation, that she went down to Faneuil Hall in Boston where a group of prominent men were already meeting and gathered the signatures that she knew would allow her to publish her work. Indeed, this account is far more consistent with the picture of Wheatley that we get from her letters and poems: she repeatedly proved herself capable of managing her own business affairs, not only sustaining the patronage of powerful women like the Countess of Huntington, to whom she dedicated her first book, but also managing her book sales in America. As we shall see, Wheatley balanced her poetic production of neoclassical odes and epyllia with any number of occasional poems, which she could dedicate to patrons who could help to support her writing. Of the 38 poems published in *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, eleven – nearly a third – were elegies.

In the summer of 1773, Wheatley set out for London on what was essentially a book tour, whetting the appetite of the English audience by publishing her poem "A Farewell to America" in the *London Chronicle* (Carretta *Biography* 133). There, Wheatley earned fame not only for her work but also for her status as an enslaved poet. English abolitionists were eager to publicize her work as evidence of the inhumanity of

slavery, and she arrived in England on the one-year anniversary of the Somerset case, which had made slavery effectively illegal in Britain (120). But Wheatley cut her visit short and in September of that year returned to America to tend to an ailing Susannah. By October 18, she had been manumitted, a coincidence of timing that leads biographer Vincent Carretta to suggest that her new status, “rather than being a gift passively received from her master ‘at the desire of my friends in England,’ may well have been a concession manipulated by Wheatley from Nathaniel Wheatley in exchange for her promise to return to Boston to care for his mother” (*Writings* xxvii). Whether Wheatley arranged her manumission as a direct exchange for caregiving or whether her new “friends in England” pressured the family into releasing her from slavery, by the time Wheatley’s book arrived in America in early 1774 she was no longer a slave (Shields 25).

Though Wheatley continued publishing in newspapers and magazines, her book was not printed in America during her lifetime. Indeed, after her return from England, Wheatley’s publication rate slowed dramatically. In March of 1774, Susannah Wheatley died, and at her request, Phillis Wheatley wrote no elegy for her (Cavitch 190-191). Wheatley continued living with various members of the family, but when John Wheatley died in 1778, she was left with nothing (191). In April of that year, she married a man named John Peters, changing her name to Phillis Peters (191). By all accounts money was tight, but Wheatley had plans for a second volume of poems. As Joanna Brooks notes:

From October through December 1779, she published proposals for a second volume of thirty-three poems and thirteen letters in the Boston

Evening Post and General Advertiser each week. This volume of poems appears to have been carefully designed to transact in the valuable sympathies of her female supporters to an even greater extent than her first: twenty-four of thirty-three proposed poems are elegies or occasional poems. (16)

Despite her advertisements, no supporters were forthcoming. During this time period, Wheatley had two children, both of whom died young and neither of whom she elegized. In September of 1784 she again advertised for subscribers, and again was unable to procure enough support to publish a second volume (*Carretta Biography* 187). Two months later, on December fifth, 1784, Wheatley died with her third child; the two were buried in an unmarked grave. In the December issue of *The Boston Magazine*, a four-line obituary appeared, noting the death of “Mrs. Phillis Peters (formerly Phillis Wheatly [sic]). Known to the literary world by her celebrated miscellaneous Poems. 31 (age).” (qtd. in Robinson 64). Reprinted with the obituary was Wheatley’s last published poem, an elegy.<sup>47</sup>

### *III. By No Misery Moved: The Limits of Sympathy*

The *Boston Magazine* obituary is unusual in the history of Wheatley’s representation in print; it makes no mention of her race. Both Wheatley’s famous Whitefield elegy of 1770 and her collection of 1773 refer in their titles to Wheatley’s

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<sup>47</sup> “To Mr. & Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, on the death of their Infant Son”

position as a “Negro servant.” Bell’s advertisement for *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* contains in part the following description:

They are wrote on a variety of interesting subjects,/ and in a stile  
rather to have been expected of those/ who, to a native genius, have had  
the happiness of a /liberal education, than from one born in the wilds of/  
Africa.<sup>48</sup>

Like Bradstreet, Wheatley was a poet whose body, violating contemporary conceptions of “the poet,” simultaneously invited distrust and readerly interest. And just as her poems were often framed in terms of race, Wheatley frequently asserted her race within the poems, claiming the identity of “Afric Muse” or “Ethiop,” or through symbolically alluding to race, slavery, and the Middle Passage.<sup>49</sup> It’s impossible to ignore the “pinions” and “chains,” the “iron hand[s] of pain” that allude to slavery throughout her work.

One explanation for why such references tend to be found within the elegies particularly is that the genre itself provides the speaker with a kind of moral power, a power amplified by Wheatley’s position as an enslaved woman. If the task of the elegy is to teach us how to mourn, then scholars suggest that Wheatley’s own experience would make her a perfect teacher: her propensity to speak for the dead in her elegies is well noted, and they argue that her position as an enslaved woman would locate her in a kind

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<sup>48</sup> From *The London Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, September 13, 1773. Quoted in Robinson, 39.

<sup>49</sup> For representative readings, see Franke, 235, Bennett, “Phillis Wheatley’s Vocation and the Paradox of the ‘Afric Muse’” (64-76), and Bassard’s elegant conflation of poetry, slaver, and elegy that traces Wheatley’s use of the verb “snatched” in *Spiritual Interrogations* (63-67).

of “social death” that makes her a uniquely qualified translator of sorts.<sup>50</sup> Paula Bennett argues that many of Wheatley’s elegies follow the same pattern, in which

the dead are brought back to admonish the living, either in their own voices, which she ventriloquizes, or in the voice of the poet-medium, who speaks for and about them. With minds and souls enlightened, the dead for whom Wheatley stands *in mortui* say precisely what she as an African slave could not. Through her poetry’s spiritual power, embodied in the Western concept of the muse, Wheatley gives back to her “Afric” speaker-self the powers, privileges, and agency “snatch’d” from her in life. (69)

Brooks builds on Bennett’s argument, noting how Wheatley “constructs a mode of moral authority in her elegies by promoting orthodox protocols of grief management, especially the practice of limiting displays of grief as a sign of one’s accession to the will of God” (54).

I would argue that Wheatley does not “promote” so much as manipulate these protocols, that although she positions herself as the guide who will lead the mourners to this acceptance she sometimes, as we shall see, refuses to do so. The implications of such a refusal become clearer when we look at these poems in terms of the Puritan funeral elegy. In his essay on the structure of Wheatley’s elegies, Gregory Rigsby identifies a six-part structure that characterizes the poems. They begin with an image of the dead in heaven, return to the deceased “winging” his or her way to heaven, offer “an

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<sup>50</sup> The equation of slavery with social death, as proposed by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death*, is frequently invoked in Wheatley studies. For attention to ventriloquism in Wheatley’s elegiac production, see Brooks’s “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” Paula Bennett’s “Phillis Wheatley’s Vocation and the Paradox of the ‘Afric Muse,’” and Katherine Clay Bassard’s *Spiritual Interrogations*, 69.



appreciation of the deceased's work on earth," turn to "seraphic strains of heavenly bliss," offer "consolation of the living" and close with "exhortation" (250). Expanding on this final step, Rigsby explains, "in the sixth and final convention the elegy exhorts, 'seek ye to join the deceased'"(256).<sup>51</sup> As we've seen, the process through which the mourner might demonstrate his or her submission to god's will and therefore "join the deceased" is the way these elegies address questions of existential mourning. Unlike Bradstreet, Wheatley demonstrates no resistance to having personal and existential mourning progress independently. While many of her elegies for celebrated ministers undertake exactly the kind of nation-based community establishment that Griffitts so carefully avoids, most of her elegies guide mourners through an abbreviated version of Griffitts's journey from loss through submission to salvation and heavenly reunion with their lost beloved. Occasionally, however, and especially in her elegies for infants who have died, she refuses reunion. It is these elegies that I propose we explore.

In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I outlined the ways that Bradstreet troubled the genre of elegy in order to avoid exchanging remembrances of her lost loved ones for assurances that she herself would live on in heaven or in artistic fame. Adopting Ramazani's term "the economic exchange of the elegy," I suggested that Bradstreet's uneasiness with such exchanges aligned her with modern anti-elegists. In Wheatley, I would argue, we find a similar awareness of the kinds of exchanges between emotion, fame, and status required and facilitated by the genre. Instead of avoiding these trades, however, Wheatley participated in them - up to a point - to allow herself to live and write

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<sup>51</sup> Rigsby notes that Wheatley's elegy "To Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, on the Death of their Infant Son" is one of only four elegies that do not conclude in exhortation (249).

as a freewoman. Johanna Brooks proposes this argument in “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” suggesting that such exchanges provide an

alternate narrative for understanding how [Wheatley] made her groundbreaking career: not by securing a single endorsement by powerful men, but by cultivating an intricate network of relationships among white women. She used elegies that mobilized her own grief and utilized her own canny understanding of the inner lives of white women to build a network of white female supporters; white women, for their part, used Wheatley to perform the emotional labor of condolence and sympathy for them (7).

The publication history of the elegy that accompanied Wheatley’s obituary, “To Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, on the death of their Infant Son,” provides us with a brief example of the way that Wheatley used her elegiac production. Later in this chapter I’ll offer a close reading of the poem to explore some of its melancholic potential, but for the moment we need only note that the poem first appeared in print in September of 1784, accompanied in *Boston Magazine* by the following notice:

The Poem, in page 488, of this Number, was selected from a manuscript volume of Poems, written by PHILLIS PETERS, formerly PHILLIS WHEATLEY – and is inserted as a Specimen of her work; should this gain the Approbation of the Publick and sufficient encouragement be given, a Volume will shortly be Published, by the Printers hereof, who receive subscriptions for said Work. (qtd. in Robertson 63)

Exchanges such as this one have always been a part of elegiac practice, but Wheatley's relationship with the mourners for whom she wrote proxy elegies went far beyond the standard system of patronage. Were it not for the publication of Wheatley's book, she may never have been granted manumission. Furthermore, as Brooks points out, "It may also be that she was able to demonstrate her own capacity for emotional work, contesting racist eighteenth-century notions of African Americans as people constitutionally incapable of ascertaining certain forms of a feeling" (15). We know that Wheatley was certainly read by her contemporaries in this way, for as the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson wrote two years after Wheatley's death in *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, "if the authoress was *designed for slavery*...the greater part of the inhabitants of Britain must lose their claim to freedom" (qtd. in Carretta, *Writings* xxxvi).

While abolitionists looked to Wheatley's poems as evidence of the emotional and artistic capability of those held in slavery, others presented her work as a negative example. The most famous of her detractors was Thomas Jefferson, who seems to be directly addressing Wheatley's elegies when he writes,

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. –

Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the particular oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phillis Whatley [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions

published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (qtd. in Cavitch 54)

Aside from the strange virulence and inherent contradiction of this passage, his description of Wheatley's poetry an example of the "ardent love" that "kindles the senses only" is particularly strange to readers familiar with Wheatley's work, and it offers us evidence of the ways in which Wheatley's body was repeatedly read through, and onto, her poetry.

Jefferson's insistence that true poetry sparks the imagination returns us to the proto-Romantic idea of melancholy we traced through readings of Thomas Gray. In the last chapter, I suggested that the proto-Romantic melancholy displayed by Gray in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was an affect inaccessible to a poet like Hannah Griffitts, that the long history of associating melancholia with male artistic genius led readers to dismiss similar displays of emotion in women's elegies, as Paula Backscheider notes, as "sentimental or even maudlin" (313). In her essay "Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse," Astrid Franke argues that Wheatley self-consciously projected the image of melancholic genius in both her poems and in the famous engraving that served as the frontispiece to *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*. Yet Jefferson's reduction of Wheatley's emotions to either unthinking religious ardor or abject misery testifies to the ways in which even a direct engagement with the linguistic and imagistic conventions of melancholy might be dismissed when invoked by an enslaved woman poet. We might read Jefferson's condemnation of Wheatley ultimately in terms of a failure of sympathy. Wheatley is no poet, he argues, because she lacks the ability to

“kindle...the imagination” to love. Yet this language of sympathetic identification necessarily limits Wheatley’s ability to conform to Jefferson’s idea of what a poet should be. As Elizabeth Barnes argues, “In order for the reader to engage in sympathetic identification, others must be shown to be *like* the reader. In other words, sympathy is both the expression of familiarity and the vehicle through which familiarity is created” (2).

In her work on the sentimental novel in early America, Julia Stern proposes that, due to the problem of “social invisibility,” African Americans were excluded from “the community’s imagination of sympathy” (221). Stern offers a contemporary example of Orlando Patterson’s theory of slavery as “social death” in her reading of the 1794 tract *A Narrative Of The Proceedings Of The black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, In The Year 1793*. Written by two African American ministers in Philadelphia, the narrative explains how, in the midst of an epidemic, a newspaper advertisement called for African Americans to care for the ill, with the understanding that they were “immune.” When the infection spread within the black community, the ministers write, their losses were dismissed. Stern argues, “In the racist psychic economy of post-Revolutionary Philadelphia, to be thought ‘immune’ means to be seen as living beyond the pale of the human community, to be excluded from the circle of sympathy that identifies white Philadelphians as brethren in common affliction” (221).

We find, then, that the sympathetic economy into which Wheatley entered was fundamentally imbalanced. Wheatley might perform emotional labor for her white supporters, and that labor might be facilitated by her own position as one existing within

the “social death” of slavery. But while her own losses create the condition whereby she might mourn by proxy for her elegiac subjects, their families cannot mourn for her. As Julie Ellison argues, such sentimental exchanges are predicated on “the connections between emotion and history, between spectatorship and the suffering body – especially the body of the victim of color” (115).

#### *IV. O Death: Wheatley’s Infant Elegies*

Much has been written of the way that Wheatley speaks for the dead. But I would argue that, by looking to the way she speaks for the living as well, we may find evidence of her critique of these imbalanced structures of sympathetic identification. What’s striking in these poems is not that Wheatley represents herself as mourner – as we’ve seen, the Puritan funeral elegy has a history of communal mourning, and in several of her other elegies Wheatley represents herself as the voice of a community united by grief. In these poems, however Wheatley mourns not as a part of a collective “we,” but rather in the distinct voices of the mothers and fathers whose children have died. Inhabiting those voices, I argue, Wheatley deploys sympathetic identification, but instead of using her ventriloquism to ease grief she uses it to interrupt the progression of the funeral elegy, refusing submission on the part of the mourners and therefore preventing the reunion that would bring an end to their suffering.

In the three close readings that follow, I hope to show how Wheatley’s elegies, and particularly her elegies for departed infants, engage melancholia in three ways. First, in each we will find moments of violence, anger, and ambivalence directed toward the

dead, either by the mourners or by the elegist. Secondly, there are moments of violence, anger, and ambivalence directed toward the mourners by the elegist. Finally, and most significantly, the emotional structure of the poems themselves prefigures modern melancholic elegies in its seemingly-contradictory insistence on both mourning without end and a separation from the dead beloved. In each, the separation takes the form not of rupture but rather of a refusal of the heavenly reunion typical of Wheatley's elegies.

*A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E., an Infant of Twelve Months*

Wheatley's 1773 volume *Poems on Various Subjects* includes two elegies for infants: "A Funeral POEM on the Death of C.E., an Infant of Twelve Months" and "On the Death of J.C. an Infant." To these poems I will add a final elegy, "To Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, on the death of their Infant Son," written in 1778. While each of the three illustrates the dangers of attachment to the dead, the first of the poems, "A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E., an infant of Twelve Months" does so perhaps most explicitly. In this poem, it is the mourners' attachment to their lost child that prevents their consolation. The elegy suggests that the mourning parents are inconsolable by choice, and Wheatley explores how their insistence on connection provides evidence of an ambivalence, and even anger toward their dead child that is striking in the way it foreshadows modern anti-elegiac practice. Although the poem seems to offer the possibility of a reunion between the parents and child in the afterlife, Wheatley has the mourners negate the possibility of such connection by prioritizing their own grief.

Given its ultimate evasion of consolation, it is worth noting that the poem opens, as many of Wheatley's elegies do, with an image that could serve to answer both personal and existential grief: the child "wings his...flight" to the realm of heaven, where he is greeted by angels (1). As she does in many of her elegies, Wheatley then gives the infant voice. In reply to a seraphic welcome,

the raptur'd babe replies,  
    'Thanks to my God, who snatch'd me to the skies'  
E'er vice triumphant had possess'd my heart,  
E'er yet the tempter had beguil'd my heart,  
E'er yet on sin's base actions I was bent,  
E'er yet I knew temptation's dire intent;  
E'er yet the lash for horrid crimes I felt,  
E'er vanity had led my way to guilt,  
But, soon arriv'd at my celestial goal,  
Full glories rush on my expanding soul." (16-22) <sup>52</sup>

Here, Wheatley establishes the consolatory apparatus of the elegy – we know that it will focus, at least for the moment, on recompense for a particular loss rather than an assuagement of the readers' existential doubts. Yet the poem is clearly responding to generic conventions; Wheatley adapts the conventional encomium of the Puritan funeral elegy so that, instead of providing a generalized portrait of the dead that sinners might emulate in order to achieve existential consolation, it instead offers a chronicle of the

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<sup>52</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations are drawn from the 1773 London edition of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*.



pains avoided by the infant C.E, an argument for personal consolation. The child is not only content in heaven; he is safe from all the pains that would certainly have befallen him had he lived. As Bradstreet demonstrates in her elegies for her grandchildren, perhaps the most compelling mechanism for personal consolation of the Puritan funeral elegy lies in this idea of death as an escape from pain. This list of accumulating evils, which the repeating anaphora of “E’er yet” presents as unavoidable, breaks upon the child’s arrival in heaven, where he is rewarded with “full glories” that, like the sins which would have certainly attended him in life, “rush on [his] expanding soul.” The “heart” of the child (Wheatley’s repetition in lines 16 and 17 demand our attention) may beat no longer, but it is finally safe.

Of course, Wheatley has not deployed the means by which the Puritan funeral elegy generally promotes existential consolation: the assertion that the loss is god’s will. Indeed, the speaker seems to think that such assertions are unnecessary, and is so surprised that the parents won’t accept her consolation that, in response to their continued grief, she repeats her claim that the child is safe and happy:

Say, parents, why this unavailing moan?  
Why heave your pensive bosoms with the groan?  
To *Charles*, the happy subject of my song,  
A brighter world, and nobler strains belong. (25-28)

Clearly, these assertions are insufficient to address the parents’ grief. But instead of trying a different method of consolation, the speaker forces the parents to articulate their

own position, asking, “Say would you tear him from the realms above/ By thoughtless wishes, and prepost’rous love?” (29-30).

This image plays, of course, on the previous image of the child “snatch’d” from earth, but the verb here – “tear,” (with its homonym which recalls the grief which would push the parents to such violence) suggests exactly how unnatural their grief is, a suggestion that is made explicit in the following line. As the OED informs us, the word “preposterous” was used to mean “Having or placing last what should be first; inverted in position or order.” A secondary meaning included “Contrary to nature, reason, or common sense; monstrous.” As in many Puritan funeral elegies, then, over-mourning is presented as an inappropriate reaction to death. By maintaining a relentless focus on personal consolation, however, rather than existential consolation, and by having her mourners prioritize their own happiness over their child’s rightful position in heaven, Wheatley is able to suggest that the “love” that would require a return of the child is not only unholy but also unnatural.

Wheatley builds on this argument in the following stanza, again suggesting that the mourners account for themselves by addressing them with another question. In a rhetorical address that suggests we might read this love as “monstrous” by calling to mind the violence that the melancholic mourner enacts upon his or her departed beloved, Wheatley goes so far as to suggest that the mourners’ wish for the infant’s return is based not in attachment but in resentment: “Doth his felicity increase your pain?” she asks (31). This aggressive response to the grief of the parents engages the

anger that marks twentieth-century elegy, and this question returns to us the brutality required to “tear” the child from his heavenly home. Indeed, the undertones of violence, aggression, and competition, which are in the pastoral elegy subverted into the struggle for poetic inheritance, here come to the fore. However, the competitive relationship between elegist and elegized that haunts the genre cannot be resolved through a symbolic inheritance (a path to poetic fame or to heaven) here. As Bradstreet has shown us, one of the great limits of the Puritan funeral elegy is the way that it disconnects personal and existential consolation when the lost is anyone other than a departed male saint. Wheatley neatly sidesteps this disconnect by refusing to offer any existential consolation whatsoever, but she maintains the competition, and in her rhetorical questioning of the mourners, she brings it to the fore.

In answer to her question, she again ventriloquizes the child, who now addresses his parents directly, telling them, “Thrones and dominions cannot tempt me there.” (35). Certainly at this point the imagined mourners would accept their fate, and though they may mourn for their lost child they would not wish him back. But Wheatley has them again prioritize their own desires. Not only do they insist on mourning, they again lay claim to their lost child. Finally compelled to speech by the poem’s repeated calls, Wheatley gives the mourners voice to address their son directly:

“Delightful infant, nightly visions give  
Thee to our arms, and we with joy receive  
We fain would clasp the *Phantom* to our breast,

The *Phantom* flies, and leaves the soul unblest.” (40-43)

In this seemingly-sympathetic voicing of the parents’ grief, Wheatley in fact lays the foundation for the poem’s refusal of personal consolation. Throughout, the speaker solicits the mourners to abandon their selfish grief. She goads them, “Say, parents,” “Say, would you tear him from the realms above?” The answer, it seems, is “yes.” Here, then, finally, the parents are allowed to speak, to answer the charges leveled against them by the poem. And Wheatley has them refuse to let go. Although the poem concludes with a final tercet, it is worth noting that this final insistence on grief offers an imagistic echo of the poems’ opening. Here, however, instead of flying *to* heaven, the ghost of the child flies *from* the “prepost’rous” love of the parents.

In the poem’s closing tercet, the speaker offers a different appeal to consolation, invoking the image of heavenly reunion that might bring an end to their personal grief:

To you bright regions let your faith ascend,

Prepare to join your dearest infant friend

In pleasures without measure, without end. (44-46)

On first reading, the conclusion seems to ameliorate the more aggressive stance of the preceding stanza. But the closing rings false in several ways. Most obviously, perhaps, is the fact that these assertions do little to address the immediate grief that the parents so clearly refuse to relinquish. If the juxtaposition of personal and existential mourning in Bradstreet’s poems seemed jarring, here it is almost irreconcilable. This returns us to the fundamental difficulty of the genre when employed to mourn women or children – the parents cannot, like the parents of “a young Gentleman” who Wheatley comforts in

another elegy, “eye the path the faint departed trod,/And trace him to the bosom of his God” (“On the death of a young Gentleman,” 23-24). Indeed, the poem has made a point of arguing that young Charles had not yet begun his life. But this elegy not only fails to provide a clear route to heaven; it actively suggests that the parents will fail to achieve the reunion that may be awaiting them there. In her seemingly sympathetic voicing of the parents’ grief, Wheatley in fact provides evidence of why they may not arrive at “pleasures...without end.” If they do not love their son enough to prioritize his joy over their grief, then how are they to earn a place in heaven?

Unlike the child, they have lived long enough to be tempted by sin, and in fact they display that sin in their grief, their implied desire to have their child return to them. Reunion may only take place if they relinquish their grief, but they have repeatedly refused to do so. Therefore, while we may certainly read the line, “[t]he *Phantom* flies, and leaves the soul unblest” as evidence of the parents’ unhappiness that even the “phantom” of their child cannot remain with them, we cannot overlook the juxtaposition of the word “unblest” with the turn to heaven that follows. Nowhere else in the book does Wheatley use the word “blessed” to mean anything other than saintly or beatified. And though we must account for the rhyme, we should take into account that Wheatley certainly had other options for ending the line. Of the nine lines in *Poems on Various Subjects* that end with the word “breast,” four rhyme it with the phrase “with grief oppress’d.”<sup>53</sup> Certainly such a phrase would have worked here, had the parents been burdened by their grief rather than, as Wheatley suggests, reveling in it. While the elegy

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<sup>53</sup> “To a Lady and her Children,” “Samuel Marshall,” “Niobe” and “Farewell to America.”

traditionally guides the mourners from grief to consolation, the parents here have taken nothing from the poem.

Yet we must ask what the poem has offered them. For while the speaker again and again insists upon the need for the parents to let go of their dead son, the dramatic structure of the elegy itself enforces connection. In speaking for the dead boy, Wheatley gives voice to the phantom of their grief. In fact, she even puts it into conversation with them. Though the poem asserts the necessity of letting go of the dead, it enacts a means of maintaining connection. Their son is speaking to them; what could be a more natural response than to reach out? Establishing an elegiac scenario in which the sympathy of the poet, while identifying with the parents' grief, also cements it, Wheatley speaks for the mourners. Lamenting the loss of their son, she separates them from him forever.

*On the Death of J.C., an Infant*

Of the eleven elegies included in *Poems on Various Subjects* only one other addresses the loss of an infant, and it is easy to read this second elegy, "On the Death of J.C., an Infant" as an imagistic and dramatic reversal of the first. If Wheatley had been too indulgent in the first poem, soliciting the parents to speak and facilitating a connection with their dead child, here the speaker seems almost resentful of the elegiac task, and the poem concludes not with an ultimately futile gesture toward reunion but rather with an assertion that the mourner is an unfit judge of its efficacy.

If we read the relationship between elegist and mourner as one that comes under increasing strain in the elegy for C.E., then we find in this later poem an elegist who

seems almost to enjoy torturing those who she writes to console. Indeed, from its first lines, the poem reads like a response to the previous elegy:

No more the flower'y scenes of pleasure rise,  
Nor charming prospects greet the mental eyes.  
No more with joy we view that lovely face  
Smiling, disportive, flush'd with ev'ry grace. (1-4)

Regular readers of Wheatley might be surprised to see her omission of the standard opening image of a saint content in heaven, but when read alone the first few lines seem merely to explain a reaction to loss. However, when read against the opening couplet of “A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E.” – “Through airy roads he wings his instant flight/ To purer regions of celestial light” – we can see that part of what has been lost here is the emphasis on personal consolation. In the first couplet of this later elegy, the “flower’y scenes of pleasure,” which will no longer “rise” might be read as the image of the departed child “wing[ing]” his way to heaven, an interpretation confirmed by the second line: this elegy, Wheatley informs us, will provide no such image, no “charming prospects” for our “mental eyes.”

And it doesn't. In place of the fourteen lines that describe the flight of C.E. to the heavens, we receive in this poem a fourteen-line conversation between the elegist and “*Death*” in which she attests to the grief that attends this loss and describes the child in terms that seem to argue against the long list of earthly evils escaped in the previous poem. The infant is not presented as one endangered by “vice,” “sin,” “vanity,” and “temptation,” but rather as a child “smiling, disportive, flush'd with ev'ry grace” (“C.E.”

15-20, "J.C." 4). The elegist never proposes a reason for the loss, never suggests that "his innocence" has been preserved by death. Instead, she signals her own limited understanding, asking Death why he chose to take the child. The conversation culminates in the only extended image of the poem, a distinctly un-charming "prospect," in which Wheatley informs us:

The blooming babe, with shades of *Death* o'er spread,  
No more shall smile, no more shall raise its head,  
But like a branch that from the tree is torn,  
Falls prostrate, wither'd, languid and forlorn. (15-18)

In these lines we find Wheatley revising standard Puritan imagery of death, which frequently figures the dead as ripe fruits or flowers plucked by god and the mourners as trees who have lost a limb. Yet this revision is striking not only in its originality, but also in its seeming purposelessness. We might compare this image to the second stanza of Bradstreet's elegy for her granddaughter Elizabeth:

By nature trees do rot when they are grown,  
And plums and apples thoroughly ripe do fall,  
And corn and grass are in their season mown  
And time brings down what is both strong and tall.  
But plants new set to be eradicate,  
And buds new-blown to have so short a date,  
Is by his hand alone that guides nature and fate. (8-14)



While Bradstreet, like Wheatley, reworks the tropes of natural world, she organizes the images to lead us to the final assertion that these deaths are God's will, a realization that may provide her little comfort, but a realization nonetheless. Given Wheatley's elegiac tendencies toward a heavenly reunion, such an assertion might even prove welcome here. But Wheatley's image leads us nowhere. Not only are the readers' "mental eyes" refused an vision of "exulting cherubs round" the infant, they are instead forced to see him utterly alone – not just pathetic and hopeless, but abandoned.

If the image is striking to readers, it is seemingly intolerable to the mourners, as we see in the next few lines:

"Where flies my *James*?" 'tis thus I seem to hear  
The parent ask, "Some angel tell me where  
He wings his passage thro' the yielding air." (19-21)

As in her earlier child elegy, here we see Wheatley speaking for the parents. But these imagined parents long for the images of heavenly joy taken for granted by the "propost'rous" parents of the former poem. Thus far, then, we might justify the seemingly torturous imagery as merely the necessary steps to bring the mourners into line. And indeed, the poem could be read that way the entire way through: A cherub responds to the parents' request for personal consolation, and they are assured that "In heavn's high places your babe appears" (24). The speaker interjects to urge the parents to "Cease your complaints, suspend each rising sigh,/ Cease to accuse the Ruler of the Sky" (28-29), and instead "Not as a foe, but friend converse with *Death*,/ since to the port of happiness unknown/ He brought that treasure which you call your own." (37-39). Indeed,

the poem closes, like many other Puritan funeral elegies, by counseling submission:

“Chearful resign at the divine command:/ Not at your bar must sov’rign *Wisdom* stand.”

(41-42).

These assertions of consolation, however, are less sympathetic than they may at first seem. Although the mourning parents in this poem seem to demonstrate far more restraint than their predecessors, wishing for their son’s happiness rather than his return, even that assurance is not granted until they ask for it, and then by proxy. Although the poem twice asserts the presence of the child in heaven, neither of these images is nearly so well fleshed out as the earlier extended metaphor of the tree limb that suggests the child, even in death, is ill, lost, and alone. That image, in fact, is never reconciled or negated. And though both of the poem’s references to the child in heaven are visually coded - in line 24, the baby “appears” in heaven, in line 32 the parents are instructed to “see your infant, like a seraph glow” - neither carries the affective power of the earlier image. For example, while we are told that a “soul-enchanting strain/Dwells on [the infant’s] tongue,” we never hear from him directly (34-35). Unlike the previous elegy, there is no unmediated tie between parent and child; even the initial inquiry as to the child’s presence in heaven is directed to, and answered by, an angel. The poem seems insistent on its initial refusal to allow any “flow’ry scenes of pleasure [...] / Nor charming prospects [to] greet the mental eyes,” and furthermore, it works to draw our attention to this refusal (1-2).

Without, or perhaps because of, the lack of a direct tie between mourner and lost beloved, the parents in this poem are provided with other consolations: their loss is

indeed the will of god. And the poem does suggest that they may be reunited with their son: the same cherub who informs them of their son's place in heaven tells them to "prepare to meet him, and dismiss your tears," a sentiment echoed by the speaker, who chimes in in the next line to ask, "Shall not th'intelligence your grief restrain./And turn the mournful to the chearful strain?" (26-27). Unlike in the former elegy, however, she does not expect or allow a response to this question. And while the poem opens the door to a reunion, the final tercet reminds us that the work of mourning is far from completed:

The gift of heav'n instructed to your hand

Chearful resign at the divine command:

Not at your bar must sov'reign *Wisdom* stand. (40-42)

The typographic echo between *Wisdom* and *Death*, as well as the poem's apostrophe to Death rather than god throughout, may well suggest that the "sov'reign *Wisdom*" is to be read not only as the wisdom of god, but also as a personified abstraction. The OED tells us that "sov'reign" was actually used in Wheatley's time as a descriptor "of remedies, etc.[to mean] efficacious or potent in a superlative degree." Read thus, and particularly when read in light of the poem's own self-reflexivity, the "sov'reign *Wisdom*" which the mourners are unfit to judge becomes the elegist's instruction to "Chearful resign at the divine command."

Throughout the poem, though the speaker provides "instruction" on how the mourners should behave, she never gives them time to do so. Instead of soliciting their response, asking them to "say," as she does in the elegy for C.E., Wheatley again and again quiets the mourners, telling them to "Cease your complaints," and "Cease to

accuse” (28-29). These admonitions are particularly puzzling, given the fact that we only hear the mourners once in the poem, and then they speak entirely appropriately, demonstrating the appropriate restraint and asking not for their child to return to speak with them but only for good news from an angel. Although this poem is set in dramatic opposition to the earlier elegy, there is a similar lack of progress. And though we never hear the mourners protesting their loss, we must assume from the speaker’s repeated quieting that they are “complaining” and “accusing.” Indeed, it seems that the speaker’s frustration with the mourners reaches its peak just before the final tercet, for she interrupts her own description of a the heavenly plain to exclaim:

Enough – for ever cease your murm’ring breath;  
Not as a foe but friend converse with *Death*,  
Since to the port of happiness unknown  
He brought that treasure which you call your own. (36-39)

The first two lines, of course, which combine a final cessation of breath and a friendship with death are striking in their implied urge to self-harm, and the enjambment does little to diffuse the coherence of the couplet. Structurally, as well, the repetition of the verb “cease” implies that, though we as readers may not have heard them, the laments and accusations will continue until as long as the mourners have breath, until they may “converse with *Death*” instead of elegists or angels.

*To Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, on the Death of their Infant Son*

The last of Wheatley's infant elegies, "To Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, on the death of their Infant Son," was written five years after the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects*, and is by far the longest of the three poems. In it, Wheatley emphasizes the imaginative power of the poet, particularly the poet's ability to facilitate personal consolation by presenting an image of the dead free from pain happy in heaven. Although, or perhaps because the elegist never directly confronts the mourners here, this poem may be the most shocking in its deployment of melancholic aggression toward elegized and mourner alike. The poem is remarkable for its conclusion, in which the "fancy" that allows the poet the ability to limn for mourners the better life that the dead child now enjoys is turned to service of imagining the mourners forced to wish a returned child dead again.

The poem begins with an apostrophe to death itself, but by the fifth line has turned to a description of the child who's been lost. Although he is at first described in terms that recall the happy child J.C., as a "child who rivals op'ning morn [...] / so sweetly blooming," we quickly learn that death, for this child, came as a relief (5, 7). Significantly, while the description of the child's fight for life is framed in the past tense, the poem locates itself at the moment of death:

                  this his mortal hour;

                  He sinks – he dies – celestial muse, relate,

                  His spirit's entrance at the sacred gate (16-18).

Thus, while Wheatley is careful to frame the child's pain as a thing of the past, his state of joy is current, and in length as well as duration it outpaces the pain that preceded it: Wheatley devotes five lines to the pain that's left behind but she takes 28 to describe his heavenly situation.

Like the elegy for C.E., then, this poem begins by asserting the personal consolation that attends a child saved from harm and firmly ensconced in heaven. Instead of having the child offer up his own thanks, however, she first allows the angels to welcome him. As in the elegy for J.C., it is the cherubim who thus relate the child's current happiness, but in this poem they do more than simply inform the mourners of his well-being. Though Wheatley has not addressed the parents yet, certainly they are among the intended audience for the angels' speech in which they greet the child

Born to new life where changes are no more; [...]  
Immortal youth exempt from pain and woes.  
Sorrow and sin, those foes to human rest,  
Forever banish'd from thy happy breast (32, 34-6).

Death, then, brings an explicitly double relief, not only from pain but also from the possibility of sin limned in the elegy for C.E. The first stanza closes with the child himself joining the angels in their hymn of praise to God, and Wheatley begins the second stanza with an image that sweeps down from heaven to include, for the first time, the parents who mourn below:

All heav'n rejoices as your ... sings,  
To heavenly airs he tunes the sounding strings;

Mean time on earth the hapless parents mourn (46-48).

The careful orchestration of the images – the wailing of the parents echoing the songs of praise of the child – is reminiscent of the two opposing removals of the child in C.E. Yet here Wheatley is a bit kinder to the parents, for the very coincidence of these events suggests that they have not yet received the consolatory message that their son is now content in heaven. This transition also works to establish the omniscience of the poet. While the speaker of each of the preceding elegies held a special power, able to hear and translate between the living and the dead, this is the first time that we get a sense that the speaker can inhabit both worlds concurrently. Her omniscience may be a result of her invocation of the “celestial muse” whom she calls on not at the beginning of the poem but at the actual moment of death. Here, then, the suggestion at the end of the elegy for J.C. – that the elegist is actually doing the work of god by instructing the mourners in their grief – is made explicit. The muse Wheatley invokes is not the Hellenic muse who attends her classical poems, but a distinctly Christian, “celestial” muse, whose gift is the special sight which allows her access not only to the realm of heaven but also into the hearts of the mourners. Like the parents of C.E., the mourners in this poem also invoke the “phantom” of their child. Significantly, however, since they explicitly accept the separation between themselves and their dead beloved, who, though “too quickly fled,” they recognize is “never to return,” this phantom, while elusive, does not flee from them and leave them “unblest” (48).

While the turn to the phantom recalls and softens the image from the elegy to C.E., Wheatley’s personification of Death as a friend is far more horrifying here than in

the elegy for J.C. The poem begins with a four-line apostrophe to death that seems to question the wisdom of the last elegy:

O DEATH! whose septr, trembling realms obey,  
And weeping millions mourn thy savage sway,  
Say, shall we call thee by the name of friend,  
Who blasts our joys, and bids our glories end?  
Behold, a child who rivals op'ning morn (1-5)

Here, then, we see Wheatley explicitly questioning how a mourner could follow her instructions in the last elegy and “as a friend converse with death” (“J.C.” 37). The fourth line implies that “we” shall *not* accede to such a title. And on first reading, it seems that is the end of it -- the rhetorical structure of the opening apostrophe drawing our attention to the poem as meditation and performance and little else. But I would suggest that the poem does answer this question, and answers it in the affirmative, in the last four lines. After the parents express their sadness that they cannot hold on to the phantom infant, Wheatley’s speaker interjects to counsel consolation:

But oh! suppress the clouds of grief that roll,  
Invading peace, and dark'ning all the soul.  
Should heaven restore him to your arms again,  
Oppress'd with woes, a painful endless train,  
How would your prayers, your ardent wishes, rise,  
Safe to repose him in his native skies (53-58).



This, then, is the way to meet death as a friend – to focus on personal consolation and what is best for the lost beloved. While this ending does demonstrate the craft of the poem – for the first time, perhaps, Wheatley’s elegy teaches its subjects how to mourn – it is striking in its imagery. The poem devotes half of its length to a description of the child in heaven; the “celestial muse” bestows the poet with descriptive acuity as well as inspiration. Yet here, the only moment when the speaker turns her imaginative powers toward an image of reunion, she chooses not to console the parents by removing them to heaven but instead by removing the child to earth. Thus, the melancholic force of the poem is turned against both mourners and mourned, pulling the pain that the child had escaped back into the present. While Wheatley may have berated the mourners of the first poem for wishing their child’s return, she never pushed them to imagine all that it might imply. And while she urged the mourners of the second elegy to speak to death as a friend, the suggestion there was that death might help them to their reunion with the lost beloved. Here, however, the poem closes with an image that, while understated, ultimately forces the mourners to imagine themselves re-killing their child. In this, the final elegy and the one in which Wheatley most fully explores both the possibility of personal consolation and her own artistic skill, the melancholic violence is directed toward both mourner and mourned.

In the subversion of the expected reunion in each of these elegies, then, we find an insistence on disconnection from the lost beloved. Refusing reunion, the elegies become anti-consolatory, extending mourning indefinitely. To understand why we find this trend in Wheatley’s elegies for infants and not in her other poems of mourning, I

propose that we read Wheatley's refusal of consolation in terms of anti-elegy, that is, as a protest of both generic conventions and of the social codes those conventions perpetuate. As we noted earlier, by the time Wheatley was writing, more and more women were contributing to the genre. Indeed, by the late eighteenth century the subgenre of maternal elegy had been fairly well established. As Kate Lilley notes, these poems tended to be particularly melancholic: "frequently, in maternal elegies, the mother chastises herself for her involuntary expulsion of the child from the protection and integrity of her own body, and for 'selflove'" (90). So common was this chastisement that the child elegy became prime real estate for the demonstration of appropriate sentiment. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century, as Anne Mellor notes:

Grief-work becomes what women do, especially in poetry. And conversely, the sign of the successful female poet lies in her ability to construct a persuasive representation of the woman who loves, loses what she loves, weeps for what she has lost, and seeks only to die. (450)

Shifting the anti-consolatory mechanics of the maternal elegy – never ending mourning – onto the framework of the Puritan funeral elegy, Wheatley is able to suggest that these demonstrations of sentiment are counterproductive. If we look at the three examples of thwarted reunion, we find that in the first two, the parents are prevented from reaching their child due to their excessive grief (figured in the first elegy as a willingness to tear the child from heaven and in the second as an "unceasing" murmur that continues until death). In the third poem, it is not the excessive grief of the parents, but rather the imaginative "sympathy" imposed by the poet that keeps them from reunion.

As Jennifer Thorn points out, the idea of Republican motherhood which encourages these poems of unceasing mourning is one that was unavailable to Wheatley herself (80). As an enslaved woman, she could not enter into the shared sympathy that envisions these maternal elegies of endless grief as evidence of virtue. Thus, Wheatley's poems also serve as a critique of the system of sympathetic exchange itself. This critique appears most clearly, I would suggest, in the first of the elegies we examined, which also provides the last line inscribed on the tombstone in King's Chapel burying ground: "Thanks to my God, who snatch'd me to the skies" ("C.E." 14). Here figured as redemptive, the image parallels a passage in Wheatley's poem "To the Rt. Hon William, Earl of Dartmouth," in which she recalls her own abduction at the hands of slave traders, describing herself as one who

young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
 Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:  
 What pains excruciating must molest,  
 What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
 Steel'd was that soul, and by no misery mov'd  
 That from a father seiz'd his babe beloved. (25-30)

Bassard reads these parallel images as evidence that in the elegy for C.E. "Wheatley is, tropologically, representationally, speaking her 'self' – the device of having the deceased speak word of comfort to the loved ones left behind is a sort of self-ventriloquism" (70). And certainly the images align. But I would argue that Wheatley's melancholic attack of the mourners suggests another possibility. The passage from the poem to Dartmouth is

remarkable not only in its description of Wheatley's kidnapping, but in its negotiation of sympathy. Wheatley's sympathy for her father, extended across time and space, is set in stark contrast to the "steel'd soul" that was "by no misery mov'd." These two images serve to link not only Wheatley and the infant, but slavery, family, sympathy, and mourning. The uncanny echo between Jefferson's breezy assertion that Wheatley may have "misery enough" but that she fails to kindle the imagination to love and the "steel'd soul" of the slave trader only etch more firmly the limits of sympathetic identification.

Accessing a sympathy for her the mourners that they could not return, Wheatley uses that sympathy to inscribe them in the socially-sanctioned role of mourning parent unavailable to her. In so doing, she imposes upon these families the same kind of separation that, ironically, positions her as an authority on loss to begin with. In *Cato's Tears and the Making of the Anglo-American Canon*, Julie Ellison argues that "sentimental conventions invite [Wheatley] to display the history of her pain, to stage herself as sufferer. Her resistance is apparent precisely in her refusal to do so" (115). I would argue that we can read these elegies as evidence not only of Wheatley's refusal to participate in systems of sentimental exchange that could only serve to objectify her, but also as a critique of a system that would have her trade her own losses for the comfort of others. Refusing reunion and insisting on endless mourning, Wheatley's poems insist that there are some losses from which we cannot, and should not, recover.

## *Afterward*

### **The Unexpected Hopefulness of Elegy**

There is something ghoulish in writing about elegy, clomping through the chronicled losses of others, excising phrases and stanzas to label like bugs. Anne Bradstreet's grandson Simon was two when he died, young enough that each new word from him must have brought celebration. Hannah Griffitts lived sixty years longer than she wanted to. Phillis Wheatley was seven when she arrived in Boston, alone and sick and wrapped in a scrap of carpet. We know this because she still had her baby teeth. I understand the irony of writing a dissertation about writers who refuse to trade on their dead. Bradstreet and Griffitts and Wheatley each wrote poems defending their intellect and artistry; they must have wanted to prove that they could write like Milton or Gray, like the poets whose elegiac verses circulated through Boston and Philadelphia in broadsides and newspapers. And at times they did, as in Griffitts's elegy for King George or Wheatley's for Whitefield. But when called by love or by duty to speak to the losses closest to them – of their children and mothers, of the unthinkable loss of an entire life lived free, they broke the back of the elegy, wrenching its conventions in ways that even three hundred years later would lead critics to dismiss their work as amateurish,

unsuccessful. “The economic problem of mourning”: It’s as a good a phrase as any to lie at the heart of the work that I hope will earn me my graduate degree.

Years ago I saw the poet Andrew Hudgins read. Near the end of the evening, he shared several from a series of elegies he’d written for his brother. When someone asked him why so many, he answered that he liked writing them, that elegy “turned a personal problem into an aesthetic one.” This, in some ways, is what Peter Sacks suggests when he maintains that the consolatory elegy is both product and process of mourning. Hannah Griffitts mourned in verse for fifty years. Why didn’t she quit? The elegy is an act of faith, evidence of the hope that somehow the poet can find the right phrase, the right image or sound to speak to those lost to the silence of death. Critics of the modern anti-elegy suggest that these poems are also, and always, elegies for the genre itself, that they speak to the failure of poetry to console. But even there, even in saying that loss skips the boundaries of language, that loss is unspeakable, incommunicable, even in using the genre to abuse the dead, in stammering and coming up short, the elegy speaks. Auden’s famous contention that “poetry makes nothing happen” comes from his elegy for Yeats, but elegy *does* make things happen.

And writing about elegy, like writing elegy, is in some ways an act of recovery. Memory ripples out so that, three hundred years after Simon Bradstreet’s death we know his name, and though Hannah Griffitts never sought sympathy from contemporary readers I leave the Library Company of Philadelphia shaken. Phillis Wheatley refused to invoke the losses that attended her kidnapping and enslavement, but we hear their echoes through time and space in the elegies she wrote for other people’s children. Yet while I

am proud that my project may do so, my primary goal is not merely to honor the losses these women sustained. For far too long, the elegies they wrote have been dismissed as either overly or insufficiently sincere. Despite the astonishing strides that have been made in the last fifty years in the study of women's writing, critics still conflate women's mourning practices with their poetic counterparts, and I am wary of doing the same.

I understand that this project skirts the bounds of the intentional fallacy, that in attributing to the poets I study a sincere desire to honor their dead I risk the same conflation of mourning and poetic practice that I resist in others. And yet on a more basic level, to read their poems in this way is to suggest that these women approached the genre honestly, hopefully, with the expectation that they, as much as their male counterparts, could use the language of elegy to answer their grief. In tracing the ways that Bradstreet, Griffitts, and Wheatley intervene in the genre, I want to draw attention to the difficult psychological and artistic work that their poems undertake. I want to show that these women wrote with a sophisticated understanding of the genre that they entered, that their works are ambitious attempts to rewrite poetic conventions so that the elegy can answer their losses. And although they each approach the task differently, the difficult negotiations their poems enact – between convention and innovation, resistance and acceptance, and personal and existential consolation – predate and prefigure the generic resistance that makes the contemporary anti-elegy so compelling.

I began this project hoping to trace a tradition of women's elegy that, in its examination of the limits of elegiac convention, led to the modern anti-elegy. I have not. We know that Griffitts read Wheatley – among her poems is a transcription, in her own

handwriting, of Wheatley's "To an Atheist." And Wheatley had access to Bradstreet – she was probably tutored by Mather Byles, who inherited his grandfather's library, which almost certainly contained *The Tenth Muse*. But these ties are tenuous, and it's doubtful that the elegies I discuss in this project were read by feminist anti-elegists like Plath and Sexton, much less by Hardy and Auden. But perhaps it says more that the thread is snapped, that each of these poets found on her own that the conventions that led Milton to comfort, led Gray and Cotton Mather to consolation were not built for them. To read the twentieth century as a dividing line in the elegy, as a time when the genre faltered because nature and art and religion could no longer console as they once had is to suggest that these forces of consolation had been universally accessible. What Bradstreet and Griffiths and Wheatley show us is that they were not.

Much excellent work has been done recovering and exploring the work of sentimental women's elegies. Scholars like Kate Lilley, Anne Mellor, and Paula Backscheider all resist the temptation to read such poems as artless effusions of women's grief. In their exploration of the ways that British women elegists made use of the authorizing position of female mourner to justify their own poetic production, they trouble readings that fail to distinguish between the emotional and artistic lives of female poets. Yet their task has not yet been taken up by Americanist scholars, despite the fact that the elegy is perhaps the dominant genre of early American poetry. As more and more work explores the emotional states of early Americans, as scholars theorize the place of sentiment and sympathy and mourning itself and its relationship to citizenship in



the early Republic, these public performances that translate grief into art must be addressed.

My work attempts to recover an archive of American women's poetry too often dismissed as "formulaic" or "sentimental," to refine our discussion of the relationship between women's lived experience of grief and their poetic representation of it, and to reveal a strain of early American poetry that rewrites and revises conventions when they fail to answer experience. Neither giving themselves over to grief nor allowing the energy of their grief to be redirected in ways that had little to do with their loss, Bradstreet, Griffiths, and Wheatley remade the genre to create a space for their mourning. Reading funeral elegy in terms of anti-elegy insists that we read these women as neither artless mourners nor nightingales who feign their grief but instead as artists who, faced with loss, expected and created a poetry that could speak to it.

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