

Women's Names in the English Renaissance Elegy

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The funeral elegy of the English Renaissance has great onomastic interest; as a literary genre it is primarily an eponymous poem whose hero is the dead person being celebrated. The name, moreover, figures in the poet's attempt to participate in a triadic process whereby as the body is buried in the ground the soul progresses toward heaven and the name of the dead subject is immortalized.

John Donne notes this process in "The first Anniversary":

Verse hath a middle nature: heauen keeps soules,
The graue keeps bodies, verse the fame enroules.
(Manley 81.473-74)

Nicholas Grimald, in an elegy for his mother, asserts that poetry has a higher role, in preserving the name:

No costly tomb, areard with curious art...
But wayful verse, and doolful song accept.
By verse, the names of auncient peres be kept....
(Tottel 1.113.18, 21-22)

Sir John Beaumont, in his elegy for the Lady Penelope Clifton, joins Donne and Grimald in asserting the poem's power to eternize the name, echoing Grimald's denial of the value of monuments by comparison:

We in their honour, piles of stone erect
With their deare names, and worthy prayes deckt:
But since those faile, their glories we rehearse,
In better marble, euerlasting verse.... (Grosart 196)

This insistence on the permanence of poetry finds its counterpart in the sonneteer's conceit that his poem shall eternize his lady's beauty long after she is dead. Here, being already dead, the woman's "glories" are preserved in "euerlasting verse" in a more profound way.¹

Elegies were traditionally written by men about the death of men.² In the English Renaissance, however, a large number of English funeral elegies are addressed to the deaths of women. Since the lives of women of the time were markedly different from those of men and since male attitudes toward men were equally different from their attitudes toward women, one might expect these elegies to reflect such a difference. I have therefore attempted to discover whether an examination of the way in which women were *named* in them may serve as a useful index for attitudes toward women and their names after death.

In deference to classical convention, and as a sign of the poet's high esteem for his subject, a pastoral or symbolic name is bestowed on her. Thus Edmund Spenser's elegy for Douglas Howard, the wife of his friend, Sir Arthur Gorges, is entitled "Daphnaïda." "The Lay of Clorinda," attributed to the Countess of Pembroke, is generally believed to have been composed by Edmund Spenser. If this is so, the name *Clorinda* in the title may represent a gracious touch by Spenser, pastoralizing the name of the Countess in this elegy for the death of her brother, Sir Philip Sidney.³

Queen Elizabeth, in her lifetime, had been variously named in literature, art, and pageant: symbolically, as *Astræa*, *Minerva*, *Belphebe*, *Cynthia*, and *Diana*; typologically, as *Deborah* and *Judith*; and lovingly, as *Eliza* and *Gloriana*.⁴ All these names figure in elegies for her. Of the many composed for her, the most onomastically provocative are twenty-five elegies published as a collection by Cambridge University. These are oxymoronically entitled **Sorrowes Ioy; or, a Lamentation for Our Late Deceased Sovereigne Elizabeth, with a Triumph for the Prosperous Succession of Our Gracious King James, Etc.** The advent of the accession of a new king from a far-off land, James VI of Scotland, divided the elegists' attention. Perhaps, inspired by the title of the collection, these elegies seem torn between concern for the dead queen and the living king, between sentiment and policy, between sorrow and joy. The names hitherto attributed to Elizabeth are now exploited, as they are transformed into foils for flattering James I.

The names are masculinized in hierarchical pairings. Thomas Walkington names Elizabeth *Cynthia*, for the moon goddess, and James *Sole Cynthiaus*, wittily linking the sun (*sole*) with the birthplace of both gods, Cynthus (24). Henrie Campion names Elizabeth *Phœbe*, and James *Phœbus*:

For Phœbe gone, a Phœbus now doth shine...
Shine Phœbus stil, neare may thy vertuous lights
Eclipsed be with blacke obscured nights (12).

The phoenix symbol, previously applied to Elizabeth, as the new *Astræa*, now is exploited to praise the new king. Thus, Thomas Cecill:

The losse is but as when the moone doth change;
Or when as Phoenix dies; Phoenix is dead,
And so a Phoenix follows in her stead;

Phaenix for Phoenix...
Whilest April showers doe teach vs how to weepe,
The sunne betwixt two watrie cloudes doth peepe...(16),

and Theophilus Feild:

Here in this earthen pot lies withered,
Which grew on hie, the white rose and the red.
Strawe roses here, out of this rosie bedde,

Out grows, and liues the Roy-flowre which was dead;
Thus is a Phoenix of her ashes bred (11).

Although it might seem, from this evidence, that an element of misogyny influences these elegies, it would be misleading to assume that is their only motivation. The elegies on the whole seem to reveal sincere grief at Elizabeth's death; they on the whole seem to reflect a desire to please their new monarch, very much in the spirit of "off with the old and on with the new" or "the king is dead, long live the king."

This divided response reappears, to a less flagrant extent, in elegies for Queen Anne, sixteen years later, in 1619, in references to her surviving son, Charles, and her husband, James. Yet again at James's death in 1625, an elegy finds comfort in "Charles ascending [who] drives away the night." The attempt to find comfort, even joy, in an elegy on death may, moreover, be seen as not only politically astute but also as deferring to the elegaic convention, in which the *consolatio* played its part.⁵

In elegies on lesser women, names take on a strange power after death. In Donne's "First Anniversary," the name of the unnamed "blessed maid...refines coarse lines, and makes prose song." The poet offers his first poem as "tribute...and first yeares rent." At the conclusion to "The Second Anniversary" the blessed maid has been transformed to an immortal maid. His poems are now done, his "second yeeres true Rent" paid. He now dares not invoke her name in his imperfect poem (he being mortal), for she has achieved perfection and her name thus has a new, great power (Manley 80.446-47; 107.516, 520).

Michael Drayton, in his elegy on Lady Penelope Clifton, exploits the power of her name to earn his poem a hearing: "I charge you in her name that now is gone [to hear these] shallow rimes." Drayton's usage suggests the name acts as a commanding muse, unlike the apocalyptic force of the name in Donne's poems (Hebel 3.113, 115).

A transformation of name occurs in the elegies for Lady Jane Paulet by Ben Jonson and John Milton. Thus Jonson:

O that you had breath,
To give your shade a name!...
Shee was the Lady *Jane*, and *Marchionisse*...
Sound thou her vertues, give her Soule a Name (H&S 8.268).

And Milton, in the same spirit: "No Marchioness but now a Queen" (Hughes 67.74). Both poets suggest eschatological issues. Jonson invokes a new name for the lady's soul in heaven, and Milton envisions her as a queen, presumably as attendant queen of the reigning queen, the Virgin Mary.⁶

Beyond Donne's treatment of the power of the woman's name in *The Anniversaries*, his memorializing an unnamed "shee" is unique and especially evocative. The subtitle of "The First Anniversary" refers to the occasion, the "vntimely death of Mistris Elizabeth Drvry," yet scholars generally conclude that the poems are not about, or entirely about, her. This symbolic name, suggested but never uttered in the text of the poems, has been

variously interpreted as representing Queen Elizabeth or the Virgin.⁷ In one eight-line passage *the name* is insistently invoked:

Thou hast forgot thy name...
For as a child kept from the Font, vntill
A Prince, expected long, come to fulfill
The Ceremonies, thou vnnam'd hadst laid...
Her name defin'd thee, gaue thee forme and frame,
And thou forgetst to celebrate thy name (68.31, 33, 35, 37-38).

The cumulative tension of repeated references to this name, which is to be remembered, understood, and celebrated, heightens the mystical power of this complex elegy.

In other elegies on women, much wit and ingenuity are lavished on the name. William Browne adds metaphysical complexity to the idea of immortalization of the name by making the name itself the woman's monument. Addressing himself to the dead Countess of Montgomery, he declares:

In thy Name there is a Tomb,
If the world can give it Roome;
For a *Vere*, and *Herberts* wyfe
Outspeakes Tombes, out-liues all lyfe (Hazlitt 343).

Thomas Randolph bases his elegant elegy for Lady Venetia Digby on the device of renaming her Venus, in an extended comparison wherein she is raped by Death. He draws an analogy to the rape of Helen in his threat to death: "Remember *Paris*, for whose pettier sin,/ The *Trojan* gates let the stout *Grecians* in" (Thorn-Drury 52). Deeming death a violation redeems the somewhat trivializing effect of renaming the lady *Venus*.

Acrostics made on the name of the dead woman were popular. Ben Jonson makes his acrostic elegy on the name of Margaret Ratcliffe. Despite the procrustean form of beginning each line with a letter of her name, Jonson succeeds in conveying a sense of sincerity and grace in his poem. Hugh Maclean suggests that Jonson applied his wit in tribute to the lady's own wit:

The acrostical mode of this epitaph...is in one sense ironically appropriate to the trivial and selfish character of that society within which Margaret lived...it is particularly her wit that Jonson singles out for attention...thenceforward, from the letters of Margaret's name...progressively (and wittily) flow those qualities which made her what she was in life... (142-43; H&S 8.39).

I had hoped to close with some conclusions on male attitudes toward women in the funeral elegy, based on onomastical implications. If we set aside the cavalier treatment of Queen Elizabeth in *Sorrowes Ioy*, as having less to do with gender than with political

redundancy, then we find in these elegies a refreshingly favorable attitude toward women which goes beyond the mere praise we might expect of an epideictic poem.

If we compare the elegist's use of the "eternal fame" *topos* with the sonneteer's, we find the former offers a new, expanded view of a woman's worth, beyond that of mere love-object. Moreover, the elegist's concern with the woman's name (and thereby the memory of her worth), attributing to it a holy or almost holy power, reminds us of the theological implications of honoring the dead, which moved the poet to set aside any sense of gender difference in his mind.

I believe the poet, in writing his elegy, opened himself to a greater appreciation of his subject by a feminized sensibility which allowed him to appreciate his subject more fully. Writers of the period were well aware of the "effeminacy" of tenderness and mourning. G. W. Pigman, in his study of grief in the elegy, refers to the many manuals and sermons which warn against such "womanish wailing" (30). The poet's motivation is a complex matter beyond the realm of this study; it deserves scholarly attention.

And yet, a darker side may be seen in these elegies, one which is not evident in a study of their subjects' names. Following classical example, wherein vituperation is directed at abuses by men (the pre-eminent example is Milton's attack on the clergy in the "blind mouths" passage in *Lycidas*), elegies on women sometimes direct their attack on supposed abuses by women. Thus the poet often uses the dead woman as example and scourge with which to flay women he deems less exemplary, women who still live. One example, by Michael Drayton in his elegy on Lady Penelope Clifton, tries to make it a point of honor that he devotes *his* praise to a worthy woman:

A thousand silken Puppets should have died
And in their fulsome Coffins putrified,
Ere in my lines, you of their names should heare
To tell the world that such there ever were... (Hebel 3.220.55-60).

Despite his praise for the dead woman, Drayton reveals he is not free of prejudice; he merely set that prejudice aside to give the lady her due.⁸

On the whole, the poet in his elegy on a dead woman seems admirably to have set aside prejudice for praise, in recognition of a common humanity which reaches beyond gender.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of fame in verse, see Weitzmann (440).

² Celeste M. Schenck discusses the elegy as a male-dominated poetic genre (13–15, *et passim*).

³ Charles G. Osgood's study of the Lay has been widely accepted as evidence for Spenser's authorship.

⁴ For the many names and loving epithets bestowed on Elizabeth, see Frances A. Yates (69–70, *et passim*), Elkin Calhoun Wilson (377, 382, *et passim*), and Roy Strong (15–16, *et passim*).

⁵ For an example of elegies for Anne, "Elegie II," by Patrick Hannay, digresses to flatter James:

That *Scottlāds king* such wonders could haue wrought
Long may *he* liue, and die well, full of yeeres,
And when *his* death shall draw vs dry with teares,
On *Britaines Throne* may his *seed* euer raigne...(199).

The poem goes on to honor "Charles (our *hope*)" (200). For an example for James, the elegy by Sir John Beaumont closes with the lines:

Continued blisse from him this Land receiues,
When leauing vs, to vs his sonne he leaues;
Our hope, our joy, our treasure: Charles our king,
Whose entrance in my next attempt I sing (Grosart 127).

O. B. Hardison, Jr. discusses the *consolatio* as a convention in the elegy (113 ff.).

⁶ The idea of the dead female as attendant to the Virgin is also suggested in an earlier poem by Ben Jonson, at the death of his daughter Mary: "On My First Daughter":

Whose soule heavens Queene, (whose name shee beares)
In comfort of her mothers teares,
Hath plac'd amongst her virgin-traine...(H&S 8.33).

The date of his daughter's death is uncertain (H&S 1.9; 11.575); the poem was published in 1616. Jane Paulet (*Pawlet* in Jonson's poem) died in 1631 (H&S 11.102).

⁷ For a discussion of the identity of *Shee*, see Manley (Donne 13 ff.).

⁸ Richard F. Hardin considers these "silken puppets" to be male: "worldly fops crowding the streets of London." Yet he goes on to link this passage with another, in Drayton's Sixth Sonnet, in *Idea*, which clearly refers to women:

How many paltry, foolish, painted things,
That now in coaches trouble ev'ry street,
Shall be forgotten, whom no poet sings,
Ere they be well wrap'd in their winding sheet? (Hardin 94–95)

Hardin correctly links these passages. It seems appropriate for Drayton to have drawn upon a source of complaint as a means of contrast with the exemplary woman whose praises he sings.

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