Life After Death

Gender, Idealized Virtues, and the Obituary in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers

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This chapter quarries the content of the obituary notices contained within the pages of the eighteenth-century provincial presses of Exeter and Norwich. For an obituary, a term not commonly used in the eighteenth century, I have taken notices of a death that included some description of the personal attributes of the deceased. The aim of the chapter is fourfold: to understand the nature and purpose of obituaries; to identify universal cardinal virtues and measure any gendered relational nature in those virtues; to chart any changes in emphasis in the types of values lauded over the period; and, finally, to assess the significance obituaries themselves may have had in shaping both male and female identities. For reasons that will become clear, the focus of this study is the obituary notices of the ‘middling sort’, whose voice in the provincial presses was not only distinctive, but was also markedly different from that of its contemporary metropolitan competitors.¹

The qualities contained in obituaries offer us a time capsule that enshrines the ideology and aspirations of character traits prized by that culture, at that time. In sum, attitudes to the dead reflect contemporary attitudes to life. As such, they provide an invaluable, if neglected, documentary source for the social historian, especially the historian of gender. Here, in the published short accounts of recently extinguished lives, we witness a fleeting but significant public opportunity, not only to commemorate but to privilege the ‘private’. Yet of course these notices did not dress the departed in the garments that they wore in life, gravy stains and all, but in their Sunday best. Thus, they encapsulate an *idealized representation* of the deceased’s societal worth, demonstrated in their reported virtues, roles, and achievements. For the middling sort these printed tributes targeted a range of qualities that were ‘normatively exemplary’: ones to be striven for, yet attainable.

1 For a detailed analysis of where provincial newspapers sit in contrast to metropolitan and elite death notices, see Catherine Tremain, “Masculinity and Gendered Relationships and Reputation in the Eighteenth Century Provincial Press” (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2010), esp. chapter 7 and conclusion.

The Metamorphosis of the 'Obituary'

In order to understand the distinctiveness of provincial middling obituaries and the ways in which they differed from their elite brothers and sisters, we need to look at a typical 'obituary' of an aristocrat (see Fig. 9.1).

Lord Feversham's death notice is shorn of personal qualities; it speaks only of blood status, honours awarded, family seats, marriage alliances, and progeny. These were Anthony Duncobe's life achievements, but the reader is left with no idea of his private virtues. In contrast, this is an obituary of an 'ordinary' woman:

Saturday last died, aged 25 years, Mrs. Raven, wife of Henry Raven, of this city, saddler. She [...] died with a resignation that bespoke the true Christian; she was an affectionate wife and sincere friend, and her death is greatly lamented, not only by her inconsolable friends, but even those of her slightest acquaintance.²

Laft Saturday died, after a few hours illness, at his feat at Barford, in the county of Wilts, the right hon. Anthony Duncombe, Lord Feversham, Baron of Downton; created a peer in 1747. His Lordship married Margaret, daughter to the late, and sister to the present Lord Willoughby de Broke, who died in October 1755, by whom his lordship had two sons and one daughter, since dead. His second lady was Frances, daughter of Peter Bathurst, Esq; of Clarendon Park, in Wiltshire, who died in child-bed in 1757. His third Lady was Anne, daughter of Sir Thomas Hales, Bart. of Howlet in Kent. Each of these two ladies had a daughter.

FIGURE 9.1 *The death notice of Lord Feversham. Norwich Gazette & Norfolk & Suffolk Advertiser, 25 June 1763. Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council Library*

2 *Norfolk Chronicle*, 29 July 1780.

Men's obituaries were laid out in a similar vein, for example the local sadler, Mr Philip Tricks: "[W]as remarkable for [his] integrity and honesty in both his public and private connections through life."³

Elite death notices, such as Lord Feversham's, did of course appear in the provincial papers, no doubt because their celebrity and influential status gave their deaths a topical interest. Yet, their personal qualities – when mentioned at all – were reserved for their own journals such as *The Gentleman's Magazine*.⁴ Employees and journeymen in trade – albeit infrequently, and often with paternalistic overtones – were listed in the provincial papers, for example, the obituary to Samuel Triggs, an Exeter tailor: "[I]n which business he carried on a number of years, with a satisfaction to his employers and reputation to himself."⁵ However, no named obituaries for servants are found. This was a submerged class that was excluded from personal attribution and, unless their criminal history made them infamous, they were posthumously cheated out of any personal identity. Of course their deaths were mentioned in the newspapers, especially if occurring in unhappy or unusual circumstances but, save in the dock or on the scaffold, they were not mentioned by name but only by their relationship to their employer, whose name was included.

What defines the middling sort at this time is contentious amongst historians. Here I have taken it in its broadest sense to include those above servant class who had to work for their living, had a measure of standing in their community, yet were not of high birth.⁶ As the century progressed, the occurrence of obituaries for people in these middling occupations – be they professionals, merchants, farmers, artisans, or tradespeople – did become far more common. That said, it is important to note that the obituary never came near to replacing

3 *Exeter Flying Post*, 6 September 1787.

4 Founded in London by Edward Cave in 1731, *The Gentleman's Magazine* remained in print until the early twentieth century. As editor, Cave adopted the *nom de plume* of "Silvanus Urban, *gent*"; this mixed metaphor encapsulated the 'brand': one that hoped to appeal to 'Town' and 'Country' alike – so long as they were gentlemen. Later eighteenth-century editors, such as John Nichols and his son, also adopted the name. The monthly journal was the first to use the term *magazine* (meaning "storehouse" in French). Aimed at the educated 'gentleman', the magazine contained a mixture of news and political commentary, arts reviews, articles of historical interest, maps, plates, and letter contributions, along with birth, marriage, and death announcements of notable personages.

5 *Exeter Flying Post*, 22 November 1782.

6 This concurs with Sweet's definition: Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town 1680–1840: Government, Society and Culture* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 179–180; see also Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London 1660–1730* (Berkley: Methuen and University of California Press, 1989).

simple death notices announcing so and so had passed away with perhaps the date, place, and manner of his or her passing. Proportionately, 'middling' obituaries seem to turn up with greater frequency after 1760, but even then, out of roughly eight to ten notices of a death, only one might fall under my criteria for an obituary, that is, including personal attributes of the deceased. Fig. 9.2 illustrates a typical weekly miscellany that included the normal mix of death notices and obituaries.

Appraising the metamorphosis of obituary notices – which accorded worth to the lives of 'ordinary' mortals and fêted their probity – is tricky because its adoption as a popular structure appears to have been a glacially

FIGURE 9.2 A typical provincial mix of obituary and death notices. *Norwich Mercury*, 18 February 1797. Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council Library

slow process.⁷ The form that it eventually took was a distinctly hybrid one: part informative death notice, part personal elegy. Indeed, measurable data collected from provincial obituaries only becomes viable for the period from the 1760s.⁸

Who 'Controlled' the Text?

The next question that needs to be asked is from where did these notices originate? How were they garnered, and who was their author? The patronizing tone of the following notice upsets any assumptions that these announcements were, as they are today, personal notices paid for by relatives.

On Saturday last, Mr James Seagon, butcher, dropped down dead in the market with a cleaver in his hand, as he was chopping a piece of beef. He was a friendly well behaved man, and much respected.⁹

This was news; death was news, and a local death, important news that added to the flavour that gave the journal its local identity. Understanding in what measure death announcements were purchased by relatives, or information about a death gratefully received (and paid for) by an intelligence hungry editor, has important implications since the nature of the transaction distorts

7 David Jenkins (1582–1663) was a prominent Royalist judge during the Civil War. His obituary was apparently the first of its kind in the English-speaking world, published by Roger L'Estrange in *The Newes* on 17 December 1663: "He dyed, as he lived, preaching [...] Loyalty to his Majesty, and Obedience to the Lawes of the Land." In terms of the 'popular' press, John Dunton's 'innovative' *Post-Angel*, included a section of biography and obituary as early as 1701, as did *The Gentleman's Magazine* from 1731, including, after 1738, some penned by Samuel Johnson. Howard, whose study largely focuses on representations of the elite, argues that in the London press of the eighteenth century, the obituary "rapidly secured a significant and consistent presence." See Steven Howard, "A bright pattern to all her sex': representations of women in periodical and newspaper biography" in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 231.

8 This date coincides with the findings of Looney who looked at the newspapers of York and Leeds, and discerned an "appreciable increase" in the local content of the newspapers from 1760–1784, and a "substantial increase" in the period 1784–1807. J.J. Looney, "Advertising and Society in England, 1720–1820, A Statistical Analysis of Yorkshire Newspaper Advertisements" (PhD thesis, Princeton University, 1983), pp. 37–39; see also Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 282.

9 *Norfolk Chronicle*, 18 November 1780.

or at least colours the transmission of the information. In this case it conflates and confuses the areas of what was public and what was private; what was 'promotion' and what was 'fact'; what was subjective and what was objective – and whose 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' was being offered to the consumer. All of which, of course, has implications for the manner in which these notices were read, understood, and digested.

It is important to note that these death notices and obituaries (at least at a provincial level), were not individually boxed-in as other 'advertisements' were (see Fig. 9.3). Instead, they were presented and offered as *news* within the designated area put aside for domestic intelligence. This raises the question of whether death notices and obituaries, offered to the readers as news, were actually read by the public as news? Two points flow from this. First, as these announcements appeared to have no overt commercial motive, objectivity might be assumed. Second, notices that did contain personal qualities or enlarged upon biographical information followed a pattern, a formula, from which they rarely deviated throughout the period. Only a few individualistic obituaries conspicuously reveal stylistic non-conformity in their (sometimes attributed) authorship, occasionally in hyperbolic verse. (These hyperbolic creations are not counted in the survey that follows.) These very personal

FIGURE 9.3 Typical layout of boxed-in and paid-for advertisements. Norwich Gazette, 10 March 1792. Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council Library

eulogies are clearly signposted as such and were thus separate from the mainstay 'objective' obituary as news content, the latter's formulaic pattern disguising authorship and giving them the authority of apparent detachment. Thus (although impossible to speak with unqualified conviction at this distance), there is a strong argument to support the idea that these provincial obituaries were both presented and read as (objective) news.

Having established they were presented to the reader as a package of *information*, what also needs to be confirmed is whether the content of these obituary 'news' items appear to be prescriptive, delineated 'from above', or whether they articulated a vision held by the subject's peers. This might be answered by the interactive nature of the discourse and the fact that obituary content was harvested from a wide variety of sources: the newspaper's street hawkers, 'herb women' paid by the editor to bring back local information, relatives of the deceased, and members of the public.¹⁰ Their content was, in significant measure, guided and controlled by the consumer. The competitive and capricious nature of the provincial news business meant that although a few successful journals passed on down through family members – notably the Chase family in Norfolk and the Trewmans of Devon – the arrival of substantial eighteenth-century newspaper barons eluded the provinces.¹¹ In short, the provincial newspaper proprietors/editors were of the middling sort themselves, and the authorial voice was not external and imposed, but involved a negotiated *collaboration*. Thus, whether written by a hack, guided by the hand of the editor, appropriated from what had gone before, or created individually, in the provincial press, obituaries were written by the middling sort and for the middling sort. As James Raven states: "texts cannot control response; response derives from social circumstances which imbue every text with a certain instability rather than a predictable fixity."¹²

Here then is an example of texts whose instability and social circumstance were controlled by the consumer. This gives them a degree of authenticity, and

- 10 For the most comprehensive explanation of the roles of newspaper distributors – carriers, hawkers, and criers etc., see: Christine Y. Ferdinand, *Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. chapters 2 and 3.
- 11 For the 'middling' credential of the editors and a fuller discussion on their role, status, and editorial 'voice' see: Catherine Tremain, "Masculinity and Gendered Relationships," esp. chapter 1; Catherine Tremain "Stationers and the Inception of the Enlightenment in Norwich 1660–1720" (MA Dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2007), published online by the Heritage Economic and Regeneration Trust (HEART): http://www.heritagecity.org/user_files/downloads/stationers-and-the-inception-of-the-enlightenment.pdf.
- 12 James Raven, "New Reading Histories, Print Culture and the Identification of Change: The Case of Eighteenth Century England," *Social History*, 23 (1998), p. 268.

also provides us with a direct insight into how they were intended to be read. Unlike 'external' dictatorial conduct literature 'from outside', there is an immediacy, an intimate and self-policing peer-on-peer prescription, inherent in these provincial obituaries. Moreover, this 'self-policing' prescription was self-fulfilling, not only standardizing middling virtues but disseminating them to an audience outside its own remit. Not only did these obituaries consolidate middling virtues, but they transmitted their worth to other consumers of the newspapers – the elite and the literate lower orders, even percolating into oral culture – thus making these virtues normative, not to say mandatory, to aspire to.

The formulaic, prescriptive nature of these obituaries affirms the middling urge for conformity. Accordingly, what was omitted in these notices is as telling as what was included. There was, for instance, very rarely any reference to personal appearance. In this period of extreme party factionalism between Tories and Whigs, a much more significant exclusion was the paucity of any direct reference to the departed's political affiliation.¹³ A very few deceased were noted for their loyalty to King and/or "our happy constitution," these, however, were usually in the militia. Likewise, apart from the occasional noted Quaker's death, other religious dissenters and their sectarian membership were rarely singled out for mention at death. In late eighteenth-century death then, we witness a religiously non-sectarian and politically neutral territory, which possessed, textually, an overarching diplomatic blandness to avoid any danger of offence. It was a liminal space which intended to expunge 'enthusiasms' that might cause affront to the living, that is, any offence that might negate or undermine, in the prejudiced reader's mind, a cherished virtue.¹⁴ These virtues had to be universal, had to speak to a humanity free from bigotry or partisanship: they had to *unite*. What is more, their didactic message had to speak to the widest possible audience.

Virtues and Their Gendered Implications

Amongst the obituaries listed in both cities, there is a narrow range of vaunted qualities mentioned for both sexes. The *types* of virtues touched on varied not

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- 13 For a summation of the historiographical interpretations surrounding the "age of party" see: Clyve Jones (ed.), *Britain in the First Age of Party 1680–1750: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Holmes* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987).
 - 14 For a discussion on the importance of 'identity' in historical debate and the confusion between 'self-identity' and 'identification with others', see Henry French and Jonathan Barry (eds.), *Identity and Agency in England, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), esp. introduction, pp. 1–37.

at all. Having first isolated the most common virtues cited, the graphs and table which follow (see Fig. 9.4–6; Table 9.1) measure the frequency of their occurrence in individual obituaries of Norwich and Exeter from the 1760s through to the close of the 1790s. In other words, the data reflects the qualities that appear most often as a kind of ‘tick box’ of posthumously celebrated virtues. These virtues are:

1. Sincerity/honesty/integrity
2. Piety/Christianity
3. Having moral virtues
4. Being respected/esteemed
5. Warmth/affableness/amiableness
6. Being a tender partner/affectionate parent/dutiful child
7. Charitableness/being a friend to the poor

These were the most frequently cited core values found in the obituary notices for either sex. Essentially they were gender-neutral virtues, but in practice they usually turned up in greater or lesser frequency in association with the gender of the subject. Two virtues (not in the seven most frequent listed above) were gender exclusive:

- Industry (exclusively male)
- Having common/good sense (exclusively female)

The survey that follows catalogues and scrutinizes the qualities listed in 200 obituaries: 25 obituaries for each sex in each decade over a forty-year period beginning in 1760. Where obituaries included more than one of the above qualities, each occurrence is counted separately. Figs 9.4 and 9.5 show, for men and women respectively, the proportions between the frequencies of occurrence for each quality as percentages of the total number of mentions of qualities for the whole period.

Sincerity/honesty/integrity had a 30% share of mentions in obituaries for men, compared with only 2% for women. This was, by far, the most frequently observed virtue to be listed in male obituaries; but was the least frequently awarded virtue in the women’s obituaries. As such, it shows the widest divide in attributed gendered qualities. Christian virtue and piety, at a 22% share, was the most frequently mentioned virtue in women’s posthumous notices. If sincerity defined the universal worthy man, piety perhaps defined the righteous woman. The having of ‘moral virtues’ as a category encompasses non-specific expressions that were not explicitly linked to religious devotion, such as living a virtuous life, or, as in the case of Mr Raven of Harpley, being

FIGURE 9.4 *Men's obituary qualities: 1760–1800* FIGURE 9.5 *Women's obituary qualities: 1760–1800*

praised as a man “addicted to no vice.”¹⁵ These were catch all phrases that indicated the deceased had led an exemplary life and were used, where specifics were omitted, to fortify their decency. Mentions of ‘moral virtues’ make up 6% in the male survey, and 9% in the female.

Greater importance in the men’s chart was conferred to the idea of respect or being held in esteem (11%), compared to a 6% share of the virtues for women. This no doubt reflected men’s easier access to the economic, civic, and magisterial sphere. Although, it should be added, that in the decade-by-decade breakdown (see Table 9.1), its relevance for men had depreciated by the century’s close.

Attributes that reflect warmth, amiability, and affability, made up only a 7% share of the total virtues listed for men (12 mentions out of 176), whereas 19% of the woman’s total (34 out of 175) is given over to these qualities. This was the third most prevalent characteristic for women, and the third least frequent

TABLE 9.1 *Frequency of gendered necrological merits*

	1760s		1770s		1780s		1790s		Total mentions		Change	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
Sincerity/honesty/integrity	10	2	13	1	13	1	16	0	52	4	+6	-2
Pious/christian	8	9	7	10	6	8	2	11	23	38	-6	+2
Moral virtues	3	6	6	4	2	3	0	2	11	15	-3	-4
Respect/esteem	10	2	5	4	4	3	0	2	19	11	-10	0
Warm/affable/amiable	7	10	2	7	3	11	0	6	12	34	-7	-4
Tender partner/ affectionate parent/ dutiful child	4	8	3	8	10	10	14	9	31	35	+10	+1
Charitable/friend to the poor	7	9	8	9	6	3	1	8	22	29	-6	-1
Industry	0		1		2		3		6	-	+3	-
Common sense/good sense		4		2		3		0	-	9	—	
Total	50	49	48	42	48	40	45	29	176	175		

Key: M, Men; W, Women

15 Mr Raven was “an opulent farmer”; *Norwich Mercury*, 15 April 1780.

characteristic attributed to a man. Again this was an area where virtues seem to have been gendered. However, in the forty years under examination, mentions of tender spouses, affectionate parents, or dutiful children etc. made up 18% (31 out of 176) of the enumerated male qualities, and 20% (35 out of 175) of the female. This domestic area was, apparently, crucial to male identity across the board, whether high profile public figures or local carpenters. The frequent occurrence of the adjective 'tender' – which was analogous to ideas of empathy, sensitivity, and of being in touch with one's emotions, and thus distinct from warmth and affability – affirms Bailey's finding that tenderness was an idealized aspirational quality for late Georgian fatherhood.¹⁶ Although it was interchangeable with 'affectionate' as a term to denote familial love and emotional susceptibility, in the provincial obituaries 'tender' was most commonly associated with the role of a parent – occasionally men were tender husbands, less frequently men were deemed tender sons. After 'sincerity', this demonstration of 'tender' family attachments was the second most frequent attribute included in male obituaries, and it was the second highest too for women. It would appear that familial authenticity was fundamental for both sexes.

12% of the qualities listed for men were mentions of being benevolent, giving to the poor, or being generally deemed charitable. Of the total women's attributes, on the other hand, 17% were mentions for having charitable largesse. The discrepancy between the sexes might be reflected in the fact that this was an attribute that was often accorded to single or widowed women as their main – if not only – positive public attribute and, indeed, their *raison d'être*. For example, marking the death of Mrs Elizabeth Woolmer, the paper noted that she was, "a gentlewoman who for above 40 years showed herself a widow indeed, by relieving the distressed, and diligently following every good work."¹⁷

The pie charts above give a strong indication of the broad sweep of desired, gendered qualities in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. To give a more granular view, Table 9.1 shows the numerical frequency of gendered necrological merits, quality by quality and decade by decade. This table reflects the data of each bundle of 25 gendered obituaries for each sex in each ten-year period. Hence it gives some indication of underlying changes in fashions for different virtues.

The amplitude of "sincerity" as a prerequisite social value for men is clearly shown in Table 9.1, while its negligible importance for women is also plainly

16 Joanne Bailey, "A Very Sensible Man': Imagining Fatherhood in England c. 1750–1830," *History*, 95 (2010), pp. 267–292.

17 *Norwich Mercury*, 27 February 1773.

visible. In the 1790s, for instance, the gap is highly significant. Here, no women were deemed to have this characteristic, whereas 16 out of the 25 male obituaries examined mentioned sincerity.

The gender divide is also evident in the presence of clearly articulated Christian virtues and/or a propensity for piety. Having been more equally distributed between the genders in 1760 and 1770, the virtue of piety shifts and increasingly becomes a female virtue, with a rise in female attribution and a rapid drop as a recorded male virtue. An evangelical zeitgeist alone could not account for the discrepancy between the sexes, and this survey perhaps bears out Olwen Hufton's point that there was "some redistribution of virtue" from men to women during the early modern period.¹⁸

In the third line of the table we clearly witness the diminishing inclusion of 'moral virtues' over the period. This may indicate either an increased sophistication, as more individualistic obituaries became the vogue, or that, more likely, such turns of phrase were superseded by adjectives that conferred a more specifically religious zeal (on women at least) as the century progressed. Similarly, perhaps for men 'moral virtue' became weighted tacitly into their facility to be sincere, and to exercise integrity and honesty. That the deceased was held in great esteem, or was well respected within the community, once more appears to be a dramatically decreasing value in association with men, with zero allusions in the obituaries analysed for the 1790s. Again this attribute may have become redundant by being subsumed within an alternative virtue, perhaps increasingly seen as an assumed by-product of the masculine qualities of honesty, sincerity, and integrity.

To be dubbed a warm, affable, or an amiable character, again appears to be less important for men. As the table reveals, these attributes were, throughout the period, more widely valued as a female characteristic. It was mentioned overall in 12 of the male obituaries, and in 34 of the female obituaries scrutinized. However, where women were more frequently described as having amiable qualities than men, it could be considered that men made up for this (apparent) social deficiency by being 'tender' or 'indulgent' parents, affectionate husbands, and/or dutiful loving sons (their second most important quality after sincerity). While these private, domestic, loving roles held a sustained importance for women across the period, and barely fluctuate, that it became an increasingly compelling factor by which men were to be measured is unmistakably exposed in the table above. Fourteen of all the obituary notices of the last decade of the century mention this attribute in men, compared to only

18 Olwen H. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe: Volume One 1500–1800* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 506.

four in the 1760s. It is perhaps, for men, the growing significance of being seen as leading an exemplary life in the private sphere that eclipsed the urgency to be publicly acknowledged as being ‘respected’ in the public one. Indeed, all other virtues appear to be sacrificed at the high altar of domestic harmony; even men’s public munificence shrinks to oblivion as a trait to be noted by the close of the century. Again, one might interpret this as another area where there are signs of a transfer of a gendered virtue from men to women.¹⁹

Fig. 9.6 compares the maverick factor of female ‘good sense’ or ‘excellent understanding’ with the manly virtue of industry.

Although the numbers here are comparably very small indeed, the praiseworthy acknowledgment that (some) women had ‘good understanding’, declined from four mentions in the 1760s to none in the 1790s, possibly because, by then, female reason was more generally assumed to be the case and did not need to be highlighted. The depressing alternative – that women were all universally deemed nincompoops – is not indicated by other evidence. Individual obituaries dedicated to high-profile erudite and ‘accomplished’ women, over time, became more commonplace.²⁰ On the other hand, the women in the

FIGURE 9.6 *Male industry versus female good sense*

19 Ibid.

20 See for example the obituary to Mary Wollstonecraft in the *Norwich Mercury*, 23 September 1797. An extraordinary local example in the same year was the obituary to “Dame Letitia Guild” which extended to over 700 words and celebrated both her private qualities and her public influence, which, it claimed, was of international importance. While posterity has not favoured Guild with a lasting reputation, clearly she was a colourful character whose passing demanded attention. *Norwich Mercury*, 24 June 1797. For

obituaries studied here, were almost never given the quality of being called hard-working. If women did work for financial remuneration, as many of them must have done, it was almost never mentioned on their demise.²¹ To which should be noted the few exceptions – literary figures, school teachers, ale or coffee-house proprietors – whose roles were sometimes mentioned, such as the late Mrs Wildier in Exeter, “who for many years has, with great reputation, kept the coffee-house, known by the name of *Moll’s coffee house*, in the churchyard.”²² Yet while female skills or talents were noted on occasions, their enterprise or industry was not. Conversely, although hardly a substantial figure numerically, mention of the fact that a man ‘worked hard’ in his chosen profession, business, or trade, slightly increased over the period. Stephen Reeve (see Fig. 9.7) receives a mention because his industry set him apart from his social roots.

Although numerically less substantial than the full forty-year ‘number crunched’ pie charts, considering the frequency of individual virtues decade by decade (as in Table 9.1), offers exciting hints to underlying trends. More work is required to bear out these findings in other provincial locations, and

FIGURE 9.7 Death notice celebrating “honest industry.” *Norwich Mercury*, 13 May 1797.
Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council Library

further examples of high profile female obituaries see Howard, “A bright pattern to all her sex,” pp. 230–250.

- 21 Hannah Barker affirms the high probability that, “throughout the century, substantial numbers of women, whether single or married, went out of the home to work for wages.” Hannah Barker, “Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution: Female Involvement in the English Printing Trades, c. 1700–1840” in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 81–100, p. 84. See also: Peter Earle, “The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries,” *The Economic Review*, new series, 42 (1989), pp. 328–353; Joyce Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 65.
- 22 *Exeter Flying Post*, 6 December 1787.

comparisons with the obituaries in the metropolis may yet expose just how important and exceptional provincial death notices are to the social historian of the middling sort.

The Subtext of Conformity?

Before analysing the collective findings from the universal seven deadly virtues, it is worth stating that not absolutely all the obituaries examined consisted of wholly laudable attributes. Yet the exception seems to still prove the rule. Here is a rare example where an obituary, albeit thinly veiled, was not altogether complimentary about the deceased, thereby giving us not only a greater feel for the 'real' man, but also a different insight into some gendered attitudes. It was not just lengthier than the typical notice, at over 200 words, but personal. Dedicated to one Dr Bartholomew Dey of Wymondham, it is worth quoting in full:

His cheerful and friendly disposition, gentleness of manners, and engaging urbanity, attracted the regard of all who conversed with him. His practice, which, as a physician, was safe, judicious, generous and humane, might have been more lucrative to himself, as well as more extensively beneficial to others, had not the too fond restraint of maternal tenderness, co-operating with his own truly filial piety, induced him, in his early days, to contract the sphere of his utility; and to confine his attention to the more retired, but not less amiable duties, of social endearment in private life. – Meanwhile the genteel competence of an easy fortune, and the consequent remisness of an active exertion, contributed, not a little, in his latter days, to debilitate the faculties of his mind, and enervate the powers of his body; which, otherwise (temperate as he was) might have continued to exert themselves with sprightliness and vigour, to the latest period of old age. – This privilege having been denied him, his friends are at once led to antedate their regret, and to console themselves for his loss, by the soothing consideration of his now happy release. – He died a bachelor;²³ an instance which may teach us, that the conjugal union

23 Even if evident in other biographical information offered, few obituaries examined stated categorically, as here, that the man was a "bachelor." Any pejorative inference is unknown; however, Samuel Johnson talked of the "unsettled thoughtless condition of the bachelor." See: "The unhappiness of marriage caused by irregular motives of choice" in *The Rambler*, in *Three Volumes* (London: 16th ed., 1810), vol. 1, no. 18, p. 118. Vickery opines:

(however perfective) is not always, absolutely necessary to humanize the soul, and to make it susceptible of the finer feelings of nature.²⁴

Reading it you are left in no doubt that Dr. Dey was, in modern parlance, a 'Mummy's boy'. Furthermore, that the author frowned on his indolence and wasted talents brought about by not needing to earn his living, was clear, Dey being said to having been in possession of an "easy fortune." Similarly clear was the disapproval of Dey's frittering away potentially useful life skills by enjoying an extensive social life. The author's voice is freighted with middling principles; it has all the authority here, and has no compunction in pointing out the downside of the elite lifestyle. Therefore, a lack of industry was cause for disapprobation; worse still, in Dey's case it was put down as the cause of his senility by debilitating "the faculties of his mind." Before his mental and physical deterioration, Dr. Dey had clearly been viewed as a friendly, sensitive, urbane, gentle soul. This was so palpable that he managed to achieve that level of refined humane fine-tuning without having to enjoy/suffer a "conjugal union" which was, by 1778, seen as a central positive agency in knocking the edges off the roughest male diamond.²⁵ Yet, in the process of exalting him for not needing a woman's influence (apart from his mother's), the author still manages to condemn him with, not faint, but perhaps too much praise: implying perhaps he was too 'effeminate' in his level of responsiveness. Here then was a man whose filial devotion was not in question, nor was his warmth and affability, yet the absence of sincerity, piety, moral virtues, respect, charity (mindful too of his aforementioned shortage of industry), is not merely an act of accidental omission by the author – but one of purposeful commission. But then, the poor

"Unmarried men were never subject to the vicious ridicule heaped on old maids, but criticism of the selfishness of perpetual bachelors was quietly consistent"; Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), see esp. chapter 2; p. 77.

24 *Norwich Mercury*, 6 May 1780.

25 See Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650–1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), p. 35; Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), chapter 16. For the positive, then negative, influence of female 'frenchified' manners on men, and the gendered conflict between politeness and sincerity, see Michèle Cohen, "Manliness, Effeminacy and the French: Gender and the Construction of National Character in Eighteenth-Century England" in Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen (eds.), *English Masculinities 1660–1800* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), pp. 44–61, esp. 58–61.

doctor presumably did not have any close relatives left to make sure all those boxes were ticked.

This unusual example proves the rule in two distinct ways. First it subtextually acknowledges the very same virtues that are highlighted in my survey as being universally sought after and desirable. More significantly perhaps is that the tone of the authorial voice affirms the middling imperatives contained in these obituaries: offering an oblique critique of elite indolence and an implicit celebration of public duty and work ethic.

Binary Contrasts, or Something More Subtle?

Obviously the most dramatic findings in terms of binary contrasts in this survey are those that show men to be sincere and women to be pious. It cannot be denied that within my research these traits emerge as the most gender-defining qualities of the period. On the surface they reflect and support the well-worn and much challenged structuralist 'separate spheres' debate. Here, many historians of the eighteenth century identified two separate spheres of influence – increasingly prevalent within the emerging middle classes – that were the preserve, almost exclusively, of one sex or the other. Put simply, men were seen to seek approbation in the public sphere, which included going out to work, civic duties, and political interaction. A woman's domain, meanwhile, was private. This is largely interpreted to mean domestic authority, which encompassed the running of and care for the household and family, neighbourly good will, and local charitable largesse.²⁶ Yet the whole area of distinctive spheres is historically fraught: it demands navigating a path made up of our own understandings of what constituted and what limited the private and public, spatially as well as lexigraphically; in addition to their conceptual positioning as opposites.²⁷ Take for example, piety in women. On the one hand, piety suggests submission to a greater authority, acquiescence, obedience, and subordination. And, as such, it is often taken to be a private virtue. However, the hagiographical manner in which piety was framed in these obituaries set these women on a pedestal, and awarded them (as well as pious

26 See Philippe Aries and Georges Duby (eds), *A History Of Private Life*, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987–1991), esp. vol. 3.

27 Klein outlines the pitfalls of the use of separate spheres as a dichotomous tool for historians, see Lawrence E. Klein, "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29 (1995), pp. 97–109.

men, not least ministers) considerable authority. Exactly how private piety as a virtue was perceived to be, especially when the practical arm of Christianity was measured in charitable activities outside the domestic sphere, makes it a contested area for definition within the framework originally set out by Roger Chartier *et al.* In other words, once recognized, and ostentatiously vaunted, piety cannot be perceived as private, that is, discreet, or limited to a household context.

Even if the frequency of these virtues might have been predictable as a part of the separate spheres matrix, my research reveals the surprising notion that domestic affection seems such a key requisite of manly qualities. Its ascendancy over the forty years, as an increasingly important quality for men to have possessed, was marked. Again this confuses any clear delineation, for men, of a hierarchy of virtues that privileged the 'public' over the 'domestic' sphere. Thus, yet again distinctions between the two putative 'separate' spheres become blurred. Indeed one might argue that all virtues, perhaps especially piety and sincerity, worked in a seamless validating synergy with the warmer human traits of being a considerate, affectionate partner, parent, or child. No man (or woman for that matter) was a complete, rounded human being, without *a priori* attending to his family relationships and responsibilities. External achievements – signified by respect and esteem – appear to pale into insignificance in the face of affectionate individualism. This chimes with recent research from Joanne Bailey, who makes a persuasive case for the ubiquitous influence of the culture of sensibility on men, as well as women. Bailey argues that this dynamic especially coloured the ideological image of the valorized father in the late Georgian period.²⁸ Calling on poetic, pictorial, fictional, and didactic representations of fatherhood, she asserts that, "in an age that celebrated feeling," the quality of "tenderness" was seen as having "the potential to revivify both individual and society."²⁹ Moreover, 'tender father' was an expression that collapsed emotional with material provision and simultaneously tempered old concepts of stern patriarchal authority into something more benign – a relationship negotiated through love, kindness, and reason, as well as provision. Consequently, filial duty, also highly prized in these obituary notices, was incited through the bonds of love. While the editorial rhetoric surrounding the culture of sensibility may be absent in provincial newspaper copy *per se*, corroboration of the prevalence of that same culture is borne out in the frequent use of the word 'tender' in association with familial

28 Bailey, "A Very Sensible Man," pp. 267–292; esp. p. 287.

29 Ibid., pp. 275–277.

relationships for both men and women in obituary notices.³⁰ Whatever the hidden cultural and societal impetus for tender fathers and husbands in these provincial obituaries, there can be little doubt of the import of domestic tenderness as the century closed.

Nietzsche stated that: "Every philosophy conceals a philosophy too; every opinion is also a hiding-place, every word...a mask."³¹ What also needs to be kept in mind is that with prescription comes proscription. For instance, for men, celebrating piety, and projecting it upon women as 'their' virtue, may have assuaged, channelled, and managed men's fear of female perfidy. Likewise exalting men's talent for integrity and sincerity and their ability to perform affective domestic relations, immediately marginalizes everything from drunkenness to indolence and domestic violence. In other words, these virtues do not simply represent unilateral patriarchal imperatives; that there was an area of arbitration between the genders is hinted at by the, albeit apparently silent, voice of women in this 'negotiated' area.

This chapter has offered some insight into the nature and purpose of eighteenth-century obituaries for the 'middling sort', as found in the provincial presses of Exeter and Norwich 1760–1800. It has identified universal cardinal virtues within these notices and looked at the gendered relational nature of those virtues, while noting some striking changes in the values lauded over the period. Of the original four aims outlined at the start of the chapter, there remains a final objective to consider, namely, the significance obituaries had in shaping male and female identities. What this survey has revealed is that both masculinity and femininity were being gradually reconceived, reconfigured, and reshaped in the eighteenth century, and furthermore, that this was contingent upon, in part, the dissolution of the vertical gendered hierarchy. For both genders there was, at the same time, a conjoining of identity in the consolidation of class. Alternatively, it could just as legitimately be argued that the very structure and nature of the gender relationship was the cornerstone that shaped the middle class. Either way, horizontal distinctions would increasingly define and dictate intra-class gender roles, virtuous imperatives, and

30 The argument that sensibility was overarching in all domestic relations at this time calls into question the praise of 'good sense' in women. If 'good sense' actually related not to common sense/good understanding, as taken here, but to the 'culture of sensibility' then, although insignificant in number, its diminishing reference in these obituaries may also be telling. Further research is required in other locations/other contexts before firm conclusions can be drawn.

31 Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 173.

expectations. In turn, class could insulate, shield and protect its members; it could also (depending on the subject's gender) limit or widen a person's opportunities.

The evidence for class solidarity coming together in a convergence of values can be found in the nature of the obituary discourse itself. Of course, this newspaper discourse was an over-blown fiction, not a gravy stain in sight. Obituaries were not a reflection of reality – a life lived – but of an amplified aspirational invention of a 'super reality'. It was a refashioning of the old maxim into 'say about others as you would have said of yourself'. Yet, the fact that this discourse was a fiction makes it more, not less, revealing. While these obituaries had been robbed of political and sectarian ideology, they were pregnant with their own, new, bourgeois ideology. They appear to be a hymn to middling virtues and gave the middling sort the moral high ground, much of which was achieved by both genders singing from the same hymn-sheet. This was not self-consciously political, but it was righteous. While simultaneously democratizing these virtues, they also became, in effect, non-negotiable: the value of virtues could not easily be argued against. Thus, here was a significant area of what Pierre Bourdieu dubbed "cultural capital,"³² where the elite were stymied in their quest to "innovate constantly to maintain cultural distance from the middling."³³ Moreover, this process, perhaps, facilitated a discourse where 'righteous' would become the new 'political'. For the emerging eighteenth-century bourgeoisie, it would seem death had a discrete and potent dominion, a fictional place in which to show-case their most cherished ideals and which helped shape their identity. It gave them a 'virtuous' cultural hegemony, and ironically – collectively at least – an immortality they could not have anticipated.

32 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction" in Richard K. Brown (ed.), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change* (London: Tavistock, 1973).

33 Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks, *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), p. 19.