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

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² Norfolk Chronicle, 29 July 1780.