EARLY MODERN ENGLISH WOMEN’S EPITAPHS constitute a large, and largely untapped body of descriptive material. A sixteenth- or seventeenth-century woman who left any record at all is exceptional and may be reliably placed among the “better sorts” when the source is an epitaph. A significant number among those commemorated in church monuments contributed to their own epitaphs. These relics belong to that body of written material by and about women. Epitaphs echo hortatory material. They assert that commemorated women did embody the ideals of contemporary sermons, conduct books, and educational treatises. True or not, epitaphs confirm that Early Modern society subscribed to published models of behavior. Survivors defined both married and unmarried women primarily in terms of family and virtue. Inscriptions seldom include individual characteristics, and exceptional capabilities are invariably qualified to affirm conformity. Engraved in brass or carved in stone and placed in parish churches, these brief records list pedigree, progeny, piety, and good works.

Men’s epitaphs of the period record pedigrees and achievements—degrees, military rank, titles, elected and appointed offices, philanthropic works, and wives and children. Monuments to either sex proclaim status, and because they could provide genealogical evidence of armigerous ancestry, families embellished memorials with noteworthy and even, occasionally, fictional forebears (Norris 66; Bertram 5). Early Modern parish records and modern deeds commonly relegate wives to the less than euphonious et ux., a practice followed in inscriptions. Preoccupation with pedigree eliminates many women from family monuments, although inscriptions confirm widespread celebration of companionate marriage. Wives, particularly when one of several, could be indicated generically, or only by given names. Richard Catesby, Knight, lists three wives in his 1553 inscription. None is named. Each is identified by her father and his titles, followed by the names of her children. The first wife produced six, the second five; the inscription concludes: “iii he married
the daughter of Edmond Lord Gray, and by her he had only Anne” (Bridges 1: 18).

Monuments reflect contemporary concerns. Historians agree that “marriage and inheritance, with their attendant financial settlements, are now firmly established as key determinants of the fortunes of gentry families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Larminie 21). Estate management, officeholding, and perquisites could contribute to a family’s economic success but could not in themselves guarantee survival (Larminie 21). Economic concerns explicit in monuments transcended individual males as well as females. When privilege and circumstance permitted women to create their own inscriptions, deviations in emphases include more detailed testimony to piety and greater attention to their own families, rather than to their husbands. Women’s inscriptions reveal appreciation of their own rights of inheritance and strong attachment to geographical place. Women who placed monuments to others also stress their own position, piety, generosity, or familial devotion in accompanying inscriptions.

Many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English memorial inscriptions have not survived, particularly those set in pavements or exposed to weather. Renovations and deliberate defacement during religious conflict, civil war, and the interregnum obliterated others. Brass and stone survive with care, but John Bridges, recording Northamptonshire monuments in the early eighteenth century, transcribed an inscription “upon a painted canvas pasted on a board,” in Long Buckby Parish, Guilesborough Hundred (1: 548). Not everyone, even of the best sort, received a permanent memorial marker, and family memorials subsume many individuals. Nonetheless, memorials to women existed and have been recorded, often thanks to the labors of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century county historians, not all of whom recorded parish church monuments so thoroughly as did Bridges and Elias Ashmole. County historians and antiquarians often ignore or dismiss all but a few monuments of special interest, but Peter Whalley, compiler of Bridges’s manuscripts, describes his methods:

He employed several persons of abilities and skill to make drawings, collect information, and transcribe such monuments and records as were essential to his purpose. I have been informed, upon good authority, that in this manner he expended several thousand pounds. The transcripts thus collected extended to upwards of thirty Volumes in Folio.