

*'She Died Like Good Old Jacob':
Deathbed Scenes and Inversions of Power
in New England, 1675-1775*

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EXPECTING the young man's death at any moment, the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman of Westborough, Massachusetts, and the dying man's family gathered around the bed of Isaiah Pratt in February 1742. The mourners wept as Pratt seemed to die, when Parkman noticed that 'by Degrees he came to,' and those present 'were astonished.' They were to be yet more astonished, for Pratt related to them a deathbed vision of extraordinary vividness. He reported seeing 'the Devil who met him as he seem'd to be in the way towards Heaven & told him that there was no room for him there.' In addition, Pratt remembered 'seeing Hell & hearing the most dreadfull noise of roaring & crying.' These disturbing images were countered by a vision of 'Christ, . . . who had a great Book before him, and in turning over the Leaves of it told him that [Pratt's] name was there & shew'd it him.' Pratt's assertion that he had seen his name in the Book of Life, which implied that he knew he was saved, grieved Parkman.

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During a period when the orthodox view held that people could not be sure whether they were saved, such assurance as Pratt's was potentially subversive. Thus, Parkman asserted that Pratt's visions 'were not to be depended upon, . . . that we have a more sure word of prophecy to which we should do well to take heed.'

Reaching back to the late medieval *Ars Moriendi*, ministers have constructed models of proper deathbed behavior.² As interpreted in eighteenth-century New England, the ministerially sanctioned model death was marked by resignation to God's will, a well-grounded (but not overly confident) hope that one was saved, and temperately offered final counsels. Transgressions of this model, as in Isaiah Pratt's death, revealed various cultural tensions. Within New England's religious culture existed a tension between predestinarian teachings and people's desire for assurance that they were saved. Consequently, Pratt's hope for assurance was countered by Parkman's insistence that such knowledge was not possible to have. Likewise, this culture contained an ambiguity about the significance of dreams: their predictive possibilities were acknowledged, but they were not to be interpreted too literally. Again, this caused pastor and parishioner to disagree about the significance of Pratt's deathbed experience. Thus, the dying scenes of Pratt and many others demonstrate that religious culture in early New England included a wide variety of beliefs and practices, not all of which were approved or disseminated by the clergy.

This point challenges the traditional interpretations of death and dying in early New England. Historians have written as if there was a single 'Puritan Way of Death.'³ In their descriptions

1. Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, February 9 and February 11, 1742, Parkman Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society (hereafter AAS).

2. Mary Catherine O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942); T.S.R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages: Mortality, Judgment, and Remembrance* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972); and John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 234-69.

3. The phrase is David Stannard's. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). This article also disagrees with Stannard's chronological model, which posits the Great Awakening as a turning point in attitudes toward death. Rather, I argue that the deathbed dynamics outlined here held constant for the century under study.

of deathbed scenes and attitudes toward death, these historians have outlined what amounts to an 'ideal type' — the expected norm as formulated by the culturally dominant group. Relying largely on ministerial sources, these interpretations overlook the complexity of lay attitudes toward death and dying.⁴ Furthermore, the deathbed scene has been written about by some historians as a 'ritual, with duties for both the dying person and the survivors.'⁵ Although deathbed scenes had ritualistic elements, interpreting these scenes as rituals glosses over the many variances that occurred. While some scenes conformed closely to the prescribed model, others differed in important ways.

Moreover, historians of death in early New England have ignored the unique experiences of women, with Peter Gregg Slater noting that 'the major obstacle to a more definitive presentation [of Puritan attitudes toward death and dying] is the scantiness of direct information on the response of Puritan women to bereavement.'⁶ In fact, numerous manuscript sources exist that were written by or about women and their experiences of death. These sources demonstrate that the deathbed scene was a time when power relations of all sorts, including lay/minister and male/female, could be temporarily inverted, or at least altered. In addition to people like Isaiah Pratt who were able to assert their assurance in the face of ministerial cautions, dying women were often able to speak with an authority they otherwise found difficult to claim. Though fleeting, the power these women appropriated

4. The historiography of early New England death and dying is surprisingly small. In addition to Stannard (and not including the literature on gravestone iconography) these works are Peter Gregg Slater, *Children in the New England Mind: In Death and Life* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977); James J. Naglack, 'Death in Colonial New England,' *Historical Journal of Western Massachusetts* 4 (1975): 21-33; Gordon E. Geddes, *Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981); and Stephen C. Messer, 'Individual Responses to Death in Puritan Massachusetts,' *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying* 21 (1990): 155-63.

5. Geddes, *Welcome Joy*, 70-71. See also Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 11-12; David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 210. An otherwise interesting article on antebellum America marred by inattention to deviations from the model is A. Gregory Schneider, 'The Ritual of Happy Dying among Early American Methodists,' *Church History* 56 (1987): 348-63.

6. Slater, *Children in the New England Mind*, 32.

arose from a cultural space that signalled the potential for challenges to clerical hegemony.

People on their deathbeds occupied a classically liminal space, seen by observers as straddling two worlds. From this liminality dying people accrued the power momentarily to reverse roles with their superiors: 'Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.'⁷ Women in particular, less likely than men to challenge their ministers outside the context of rituals, used the liminality of the deathbed to enable them to speak their minds in opposition to traditional notions of decorum. During these moments of power inversion, tensions within the religious culture of eighteenth-century New England were illuminated as if by a flash. For a moment women were like men, laity were like clergy, assurance was possible, and dreams revealed the realities of heaven and hell.

MODEL DEATHBED SCENES

As a starting point, the model deathbed scene must be described so that we may understand the variations from it. For this purpose I will describe the model deathbed scene of the fictional Elizabeth Dyer.⁸ The scene began when Dyer's sickbed was transformed into a deathbed, a change not so much physical as interpretive. At some point in her long illness, Dyer and her family realized that her malady was likely to be fatal. When this realization was made, the family made an effort never to leave Dyer unattended, in case she suddenly grew worse. The appointed 'watcher' was in this case a female family member, but if financial circumstances had permitted, Dyer's family may have relied on a midwife or domestic. Throughout her sickness neighbors and friends had been paying visits, and when she took a sudden bad turn, they were called to be present at her end, along with her family members. The minis-

7. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), 97.

8. This scene is a composite based on hundreds of approvingly noted deathbed scenes that appear in sermons, ministerial diaries, and lay diaries.

ter, who had already visited with Dyer, was then called in to pray with her for one final time. When the minister arrived, he prayed with Dyer and questioned her about her beliefs (though he had known her for many years) and asked whether she had good hopes for going to heaven. Since all was going according to plan, Dyer answered that she believed in God's mercy through Christ and hoped (but was not overly sure) she was going to heaven. Ultimately, Dyer gave a final blessing to her husband, her children, and her friends who were present. Shortly, death arrived and Dyer's husband performed the practical and symbolic act of closing her eyes. Weeping, which up to this point had been controlled, commenced more loudly. A few hours later Dyer's daughters and female friends washed her body and wrapped it in a death shroud, concluding the deathbed scene.

From the clergy's point of view, the most crucial part of the deathbed scene was the interaction between the dying person and the minister. During his questioning of the dying person, it would become clear to the minister and other observers how godly the person really was. Because the stakes were so high, ministers were explicit about what people should think, what they should say, and how they should behave on their deathbeds. Cotton Mather offered a list of appropriate expressions from the mouth of a dying person:

'Vain World! False World! Oh! that I had minded this World less . . .'

'There is no Evil so Odious, or Dangerous, or Damnable, as our Sin.'

'Oh! my vain Company, it has undone me: I wish I had never seen the face of such and such young people; Their company hath been Damnation of my Soul!'

'Christ is the most precious Thing imaginable.'

'Alehouses *are* Hellhouses!'⁹

In all of these ministerially sanctioned expressions, the dying person reflected on his or her life, repented for sin, and put faith in

9. Cotton Mather, *The Thoughts of a Dying Man* (Boston: B. Green & J. Allen, 1697), 9, 12, 16, 17, 14.

mercy through Christ. As Benjamin Colman argued, the goal in death was 'to die in a *pardoned, justified, and sanctified State*, having our Peace made with God, reconciled to God thro' the Death of His Son.'¹⁰ But in no case were people to be absolutely sure that heaven was their final destination. Although hope was encouraged, sureness betrayed a complacency and lack of rigor in one's self-examination. This 'well-grounded Hope'¹¹ of the ministerial model created in the dying person a willingness to die and the power to be resigned to God's will.

Many lay deathbed scenes conformed to the model elucidated by ministers, especially regarding resignation to God's will. The power of the model is apparent in the dying scene of Elizabeth Foxcroft, who expressed her resignation to God's will that she suffer. In 1721 the fifty-seven-year-old Foxcroft was dying and in a great deal of pain. Her reaction to her physical discomfort demonstrates the power of the cultural norms: 'when a very shocking Turn sometimes forced Her to lisp out a Complaint of, "Pain, Pain!" She wou'd instantly correct Her self, and rebuke Her (seeming) Impatience; saying, "But 'tis my heavenly Father, who is thus chastning of Me, and I deserve it."¹² This deathbed scene reveals a dialectic between Foxcroft's own very palpable bodily torment and the cultural imperative to see pain as the just punishment for one's sins. While Foxcroft expressed her willingness to suffer, Cotton Mather's sister, Jerusha Oliver, spoke of her willingness to die. So exemplary were Oliver's words that Mather published a long description of her dying days. Particularly worthy of emulation, Mather felt, were expressions such as this, uttered by Oliver when she realized she was dying: 'Here is a Strange Thing! when I was in Health, Death was a Terror to me. But now I know, I shall Dy, I am not at all afraid of it.'¹³ Oliver's fearlessness derived from

10. Benjamin Colman, *Dying in Peace in a Good Old Age* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1730), 10.

11. *Ibid.*, 11.

12. Thomas Foxcroft, *A Sermon . . . After the Funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Foxcroft* (Boston: B. Green, 1721), 40.

13. [Cotton Mather], *Memorials of Early Piety, Occurring in the Holy Life & Joyful Death of Mrs. Jerusha Oliver* (Boston: T. Green, 1711), 49.

her trust in God's will. For many people, this willingness to die derived from the anticipation of a union with Christ. After a visit to the dying, the Reverend Samuel Chandler reported that 'Jonathan Jenkins wife talks like a Christian says the world is nothing she would part with it all for one minute enjoyment of Christs presence.'¹⁴ Sometimes this willingness to part with the pleasures of this world could be taken too far, at least in the opinion of the clergy. When Jonathan Dayly's wife said upon her deathbed that 'her Husband, & Children & all seems no more to her than Dirt in comparison of Christ,' Chandler felt compelled to differ gently with her. As he phrased it in his diary, 'it was mentioned to her it would be a tryall to part with them.'¹⁵ More often, however, ministers noted a strong willingness to die with approval, as when Ebenezer Parkman recorded the 'Remarkable Declaration' of the dying Susé Rogers in 1740. 'As to dying,' Parkman wrote, 'She hop'd she was ready, and was willing because she hop'd she had not sought God in vain (for He is a Mercifull God).'¹⁶

Lay people as well as ministers recorded many such instances of model deaths in which the dying person expressed a willingness to die and be with Christ. When Abigail Cleaveland of Canterbury, Connecticut, wrote to her sons describing the death of their father, she emphasized the dying man's knowledge of his approaching end, his resigned solemnity, and his desires to be with Christ:

Your dear and tender and careful father the ninth day of february [1751] I trust fell a sleep in Jesus, the mor[n]ing before he dyed his heart was greatly enlarged to call in all the Christians to sing and pray with him, he said it would be the last meeting he beleived he ever should have with them on this side eternity, well wee sent out and they came in and he called upon them to sing and pray and to pray for him, he was asked what they should pray for, he said, that I may touch the hem of Christs garment and be made whole.¹⁷

14. Diary of Samuel Chandler, February 16, 1746, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem (hereafter PEM).

15. *Ibid.*, January 1, 1746.

16. April 1, 1740, Francis G. Walett, ed., *The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, 1703-1782* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1974), 76.

17. Abigail Cleaveland to John and Ebenezer Cleaveland, letter of March 2, 1751, John Cleaveland Papers, PEM.

The communal aspect of the deathbed is apparent in this scene, with the dying man's wish to be with 'all the Christians' as he died. Another letter bearing the grim news of the death of a family member illustrates the significance some lay people attached to the willingness of a person to die. In 1763 Tarrant Putnam of Sutton, Massachusetts, was faced with the task of writing to his son, Elijah, to inform him of the death of his sister Molly. The elder Putnam wrote,

a few Days before her Death she seem'd wonderfully resin'd to the will of God whether in Life or Death. Two Days before her Death I asked her if she was willing to part with us, she said with a great zeal & earnestness, O Father said she I am willing to leave Father & Mother & Brothers & Sisters & Everything to go to Christ.¹⁸

Putnam interpreted Molly's resignation to the will of God as cause for good hope that she was in heaven.

This sort of model death provided both the dying and the survivors with an optimistic view of the dying person's final estate. In the case of Molly Putnam's death, her father opined to his son that 'she gave very good ground to hope she made a happy change.'¹⁹ Putnam expressed this opinion despite frequent ministerial injunctions against such beliefs, such as when Mather Byles argued that 'it is a vain arrogance to judge a man's estate in the *other world*, by the manner of his expiration *here*.' Byles decried as 'daring pride' the tendency of people to 'judge of their neighbours uprightness, by the events that befall them' on their deathbeds.²⁰ Similarly, Samuel Willard argued that 'Death gives us no rule of judging whether men be good or bad.'²¹ Warnings like these had

18. Tarrant Putnam to Elijah Putnam, letter of March 28, 1763, Putnam Family Manuscripts, AAS.

19. Ibid. For the sixteenth-century antecedents of this belief, see Richard Wunderli and Gerald Broce, 'The Final Moment before Death in Early Modern England,' *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20 (1989): 268-69. Wunderli and Broce argue for an early modern popular belief that one's final moments *determined* whether one went to heaven or hell. If correct, this would differ from the eighteenth-century dynamic I am describing, where one's final moments merely *signified* one's final destination.

20. Mather Byles, *The Character of the Perfect and Upright Man; His Peaceful End Described* (Boston: S. Gerrish, 1729), 15.

21. Samuel Willard, *The Mourners Cordial Against Excessive Sorrow* (Boston: Benjamin Harris and John Allen, 1691), 21. Also, 71, 104.

little effect on lay people, however, who throughout this period found comfort in the model deaths of their loved ones.

For example, in October 1712 John Paine experienced the deaths of two of his brothers within two weeks. Five months later, on his own fifty-third birthday, Paine reflected that 'I have cause with sorrow of heart to bewail and lament the awfull Stroakes of the rod of god upon me in taking away two of my natural breth[r]en who were dear unto me.' Despite this sadness, Paine had cause to hope: 'nevertheless there was mercy mingled with this affliction & honey with this gall in that they both departed under comfortable circomstances [*sic*] as to their Eternal Estate, glory be to god.'²² A notably explicit example of the connection that lay people drew between people's final words and their final estate was recorded by Jonathan Willis, a lay person from Medford, Massachusetts. In 1744 he noted the arrival in town of one Mr. Parks, a kinsman of Willis. According to Willis, Parks 'com to town last night & before this morning he departed this Life and we cant doubt but it is for a better, for I hear that a day or 2 ago he did exspress [*sic*] his joyfull hope & his undaunted ferelessness of dying.'²³ Despite the warnings of ministers against inferring so much from a person's dying words, Willis clearly was comforted by his relative's lack of fear of death. Thus, ministers and lay people interpreted model deaths differently: ministers saw them as demonstrating the possibility that a person was saved, while lay people often regarded them as proof that a person was saved.

Perhaps the most vivid account of a person's dying demeanor providing comfort to the survivors is recorded in the diary of Sarah Prince of Boston. In July 1744, when Sarah was only sixteen, her sister Deborah lay on her deathbed after seven weeks of a painful illness. When it became apparent that Deborah was going to die, Sarah was anguished because Deborah did not seem to be dying with the comfort one would expect of a person who was

22. 'Deacon John Paine's Journal,' *Mayflower Descendant* 9 (1907): 98.

23. Diary of Jonathan Willis, July 21, 1744, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS).

saved. 'When we found she was evidently struck with death,' reported Sarah, 'she was in extream agonies of soul.' Deborah's display of moaning and crying was 'eno' to melt the hardest heart,' causing Sarah and her brother to retire to another room where they could weep more loudly without fear of disturbing their sister. When her sister Mercy told Sarah to compose herself a little, Sarah replied that her tears were "'for her soul which is worth 10,000 worlds and I can't bear it shou'd go out of the world in Uncertainties.'" For Sarah, her sister's dying demeanor was extremely significant as a sign of whether she was saved. This began to worry her brother, who nervously asked, "'do you doubt of her state?'" But before this debate could be continued, Mercy returned to the room weeping joyful tears and asking her siblings to hurry to the deathbed. They witnessed the glorious sight that 'every cloud was scattered and God had lifted up the light of his Countenance on her. . . . The Chamber which a minute before was full of distress and anguish now fill'd with Joy, Praise, Love and Admiration.' Deborah's peaceful and God-loving demeanor had a powerful effect on the observers: 'we to whom she was dearest were the most willing to part with her — for my part I was intirely willing.'²⁴ A model death made all the difference to many pious observers. Although ministers warned that people's final estates could not be judged by the circumstances of their deaths, lay survivors almost always took comfort when a loved one died well.

A model death also could serve as a resolution to some troubling issues in a person's life. On the deathbed one was expected to thank one's survivors, confess one's sins, grant forgiveness to sinners, and otherwise make a final reckoning. While his mother was dying in 1695, Samuel Sewell tried to achieve a measure of closure in the relationship. While praying with her he 'took the opportunity to thank her for all her Labours of Love to me and mine, and ask'd

24. Rebecca Husman, ed., 'Sarah Prince Gill Diary,' typescript at Kellogg Library, Bard College, 14-15. For another account of this deathbed scene, written by Sarah's father, see Thomas Prince, *The Sovereign God Acknowledged and Blessed, both in Giving and Taking Away* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1744), 31-32.

her pardon of our undutifullness.'²⁵ Similarly, Samuel Chandler reported an instance of deathbed forgiveness when an old man, 'on his death Bed I think, says he is willing to die, he freely forgave his wife & ask'd her forgiveness, she forgave him.'²⁶

This last example begins to hint at the importance placed on a person's dying words. If a person died without being able to speak, survivors might worry about whether the person was saved. When Caleb White died in 1770, he left Elizabeth, his wife of three years, without any final words of comfort. Apparently Caleb suffered from a terrible fever that 'deprived him of his senses, so that he was never himself not long together to his dying day.' This made his death difficult for his widow to accept. 'O its dreadfull! beyond Expression,' she lamented, 'to Lose ones dear freinds [*sic*]; without one ray of hope that it is well with them.' She would have much preferred a death in which he was able to speak to her and comfort her: 'If he had died upon a sick bed, I should have some Peace concerning him, but now I have none. He is gone & I know not how it is with him.'²⁷ Even when the dying person was not a loved one, his or her words carried a great deal of weight. While serving in the French and Indian War, Benjamin Glasier of Ipswich witnessed another soldier hanged for theft. Inspired to compose a poem by this spectacle, Glasier commented at length on the condemned man's last words:

the twentyfifth Day of July
 a man for theft was Judged to Dye
 and when he Died on the Lad[d]er hold
 he Cried Lord have mercy on my Soul.

 he Spoke to the Sold[i]ers grate and Small
 to mind in time on god to Call
 and not goo [*sic*] on as he had Dune
 Least to the galows all Should Come

25. June 21, 1695, M. Halsey Thomas, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewell, 1674-1729* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 336.

26. Diary of Samuel Chandler, January 6, 1746, PEM. See also May 8, 1747, Walett, ed., *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, 154.

27. Elizabeth Craft White Diary, January 15, 1771, and December 26, 1770, Heath Family Papers, MHS.

and mind [h]onesty more than their purse
 Not Steall nor Ley Sware Nor Curse
 Least to the galous them Selves they Brang
 and with a holter their to Swing.²⁸

This was the only occasion in a lengthy diary when Glasier copied someone's spoken words. Uttered on the verge of death, these words appeared to Glasier as more noteworthy than usual.

Thus, the liminal position of the dying person, poised between the worlds of the living and of the dead, gave his or her words greater power than they ordinarily had. In some cases lay people believed that the words of a dying person had quasi-magical powers. Samuel Sewell seemed to feel that the blessing of a dying person was somehow more efficacious than an ordinary blessing. On one occasion in 1691, Sewell sought the power of a deathbed blessing as protection for his children. After visiting a man so sick that he had missed two consecutive church meetings, Sewell wrote, 'Had my four children to Mr. Robert Saunderson to receive his Blessing as he lay on his Bed.' In 1698 Sewell paid a visit to the dying Charles Morton. After prayers and pious conversation, Sewell prepared to leave. 'When I took leave, He said, "I wish you well and all your family." I told him I doubted not but that I should fare the better for his Blessing.' Similarly, ten years later Sewell attended the deathbed of another man and 'ask'd his Blessing for me and my family.' At first Sewell was disappointed in his request because the dying man felt that Sewell was already blessed. But at his departure Sewell got his wish: 'Yet at my going away He pray'd for a Blessing for me.'²⁹

In a like manner, people often mentioned the dying words of a loved one as a spur for greater piety. When Mehitable Brigham joined the church in Westborough, she reported that 'the ordinance of the Lords Supper' was 'a matter which my Eldest sister a little before her Death prest upon me and Intreated me by no

28. 'French and Indian War Diary of Benjamin Glasier of Ipswich, 1758-1760,' *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 86 (1950): 72.

29. October 18, 1691; April 8, 1698; August 12, 1708; Thomas, ed., *Diary of Samuel Sewell*, 282, 391, 599.

means to Neglect.³⁰ Given the power of her sister's words on her deathbed, Brigham could not ignore her request. It was always worthy of note when a dying person addressed a survivor with a specific request, especially when that person's request came as part of a model deathbed scene. Thus, even those aspects of deathbed scenes that conformed to the clergy's model of a proper death—a willingness to die, resignation to God's will, the offering of blessings and counsels—could be transformed into signals of the potential for dissonance between laity and clergy on matters of death.

NON-MODEL DEATHBED SCENES

Traditional interpretations notwithstanding, not all deathbed scenes adhered to the model; occasionally lay people did not die with equanimity. David D. Hall argues that observers of lay deaths did not record anguish on the deathbed: 'None make reference to despair.' According to Hall, 'Out of ritual emerged peace, or at least the strength to face the King of Terrors.'³¹ Hall's analysis of the meaning of the deathbed, while a useful corrective to those who argue that Puritans usually died in terror, is overly optimistic. Hall's reasoning is that ordinary people desired comfort, therefore the function of their religion and their religious rituals was to provide them with comfort. The reality was more complex. While Hall's interpretation holds true for a majority of cases, in some deathbed scenes that did not adhere to the model of a hopeful death, the dying person expired fearing Satan, hell, or simply death itself.

It was common for a person to have fears of death in the days leading up to his or her mortal hour. Dozens of examples of this dynamic survive, such as the case of 'Old Mr Randall' of York in what is today Maine. Like many lay people, he had once been relatively sure of his future state, but the trauma of an imminent death caused him to have doubts. As his minister noted, Randall

30. Confession of Mehitabel Brigham, 1749, Ebenezer Parkman Papers, Box 2, Folder 2, AAS. For a ministerial view on the power of one's dying counsels, see Ivory Hovey, *The Duty and Privilege of Aged Saints* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1749), 28.

31. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 209, 210.

'says that he has had such a Love to Christ that he could have parted this life for the next but now he has not clear evidences.'³² Although no record survives of his dying moments, if Randall was like most people his doubts evaporated shortly before he died.

But perhaps Randall was among the small group of people who felt no comfort even as they passed out of this world. Again, this was not the typical lay response to dying, but it happened often enough to demonstrate that there were limits to the extent to which lay people could appropriate aspects of religion in order to gain comfort. Isaac Backus noted several such distressing cases in his diary. A particularly upsetting example occurred in 1753 when Backus received a report of the sickness and death of his sister Eunice. His brother's letter was 'shocking,' since Eunice was 'in great distress of mind 'till the last.'³³ In a case in which he was not so personally involved, Backus reported that Priscilla Eddy 'had no strength to trust in Christ' even as she died.³⁴ Likewise, when Backus preached at the house of Richard Gridly in 1766 he was informed that Gridly's wife had died a month before 'in great terror of mind.'³⁵ Ebenezer Parkman also occasionally noted instances of people dying without comfort. 'I am told by the Deacon's [John Fay's] Son James,' reported Parkman in 1748, 'that they could not discern that he was any clearer about his Spiritual state till he dyed, than he was when I was with him.'³⁶ Although it would seem intuitively that there was a great incentive for people on their deathbed to find assurance, that was not always the case. Religion could not always be self-consciously manipulated to provide comfort.

In a large majority of cases, however, breaches in the model

32. Diary of Samuel Chandler, January 21, 1746, PEM.

33. September 8, 1753, William G. McLoughlin, ed., *The Diary of Isaac Backus* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1979), 304.

34. September 2, 1756, *ibid.*, 427.

35. May 12, 1766, *ibid.*, 630.

36. January 8, 1748, Walett, ed., *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, 169. It should be noted that dying without comfort was not only something that happened to lay people. It caused a great deal of talk when Increase Mather died in anguish. See July 30, 1723, Thomas, ed., *Diary of Samuel Sewell*, 1007; Cotton Mather, *Parentator* (Boston: B. Green, 1724).

deathbed scene served to signal tensions between lay and clerical understandings of religion, often revolving around the issue of fear. In some cases the transgression was caused by an observer of the deathbed scene. When the Reverend John Rogers of Eliot, Maine, visited the dying wife of a certain Mr. Shorey in 1748, Rogers was upset by the man's strange behavior. Instead of joining the prayers around the bedside as was customary, 'he appeared afraid, got and kept out of the way as much as possible.'³⁷ An even greater breach of bedside decorum was recorded by Ebenezer Parkman in 1727. Called to the deathbed of the wife of Samuel Forbush in the evening, Parkman commenced with his role in the deathbed scene, asking the dying woman if she had repented of her sins, if she had found the Lord's Supper a comfort during her life, and if she truly loved the godly. The dying woman was answering all the questions in a correct manner when one observer, 'Old Mr. Forbush,' in a 'sad passionate manner' intoned, "'Sir, We are grown folks.'" This breach in the model deathbed scene shocked Parkman: 'I turned about in great Surprize.' What followed was a lengthy debate between the learned minister and the disputatious observer, who argued that "'we understand these things already have read in the Bible and Some other Books, and ourselves know these things being grown folks and come into years.'"³⁸ Old Thomas Forbush held firm to his point that implicit in the structure of the model deathbed scene was the enactment of unequal power relations, with the dominant clergyman leading the scene and asking unnecessary, condescending questions. By speaking up in this highly charged scene, Forbush registered his displeasure with such an uneven arrangement.

More common than an observer committing a breach in the model deathbed scene, though, was for the dying person to be the one to act in opposition to the model. Wartime, with people acting outside the context of home and family, caused a number of deaths that did not adhere to the model. Caleb Rea, on the expedition

37. 'Diary of Rev. John Rogers,' *Old Eliot* 7 (1906): 18.

38. April 21, 1727, Walett, ed., *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, 24-25.

against Ticonderoga in the French and Indian War, commented on the 'horrid cursing and swearing there is in the Camp.' Particularly shocking to Rea was the fact that 'those that were gasping for their last breath wou'd commonly breathe out Oaths and Curses.' These transgressions of the model deathbed scene witnessed by Rea as a wartime doctor were so disturbing that he lamented, 'I can't but Charge our defeat on this Sin. . . .'³⁹ The pressures of wartime did not lessen Rea's attachment to his culture's dominant model of deathbed behavior.

Back on the home front, ministers expected lay people to tread a narrow path regarding deathbed repentances. On the one hand, clergymen wanted lay people to be repentant for individual sinful acts and other isolated transgressions. The Reverend John Ballantine, minister in Westfield, Massachusetts, visited Samuel Johnson and asked him the usual questions, including if he was sorry for his sins. 'I asked him if his striking an officer, who was in the discharge of his duty seemed a sin, he said no. People are convinced now adays without having any knowledge of sin.'⁴⁰ Ballantine's editorial comment reveals that he believed Johnson's answer to be typical of a lay tendency, not an unusual aberration. Similarly, Ebenezer Parkman found the Widow Pierce to be unrepentant on her deathbed. According to Parkman, 'She is very bad, yet no great Signs of Repentance. Her Case very Deplorable! God be Mercifull to her!'⁴¹ In all likelihood Johnson and Pierce did not honestly believe they had sinned and consequently were not about to repent on their deathbeds.

On the other hand, ministers were wary when lay people attempted to repent for a sinful life, as opposed to sinful acts. Stressing the need for godliness throughout one's life, clergymen did not want people waiting until their dying moments to realize the

39. 'The Journal of Dr. Caleb Rea, Written During the Expedition Against Ticonderoga in 1758,' *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 18 (1881): 106. For another similar example see Louis Effingham de Forest, ed., *Louisbourg Journals, 1745* (New York: Society of Colonial Wars, 1932), 18.

40. John Ballantine Diary, February 23, 1767, typescript at AAS.

41. October 16, 1752, Walett, ed., *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, 262.

consequences of living a life in sin. Cotton Mather summed up the prevailing ministerial view when he wrote that 'a *Repentance* at the Last, if there be any *Space* for it, is mostly an *Insincere*, but always a *Suspicious* Repentance.' Noting that the terror of the deathbed could lead people to false conversions, Mather argued that the '*Change of Mind*, which takes men upon a Death bed, is usually no more than a *Conviction* upon them; there is no Real *Conversion* in it.'⁴² Similarly, Thomas Foxcroft warned against 'the great but too common Folly of depending on' a 'Death-bed Repentance.'⁴³

Despite these cautions many lay people persisted in these breaches of the model deathbed scene. Repentances for avoiding the Lord's Supper were common, such as when Ebenezer Parkman visited Lieutenant Maynard's father. On this visit he found him 'in a very low Condition, and it was very doubtful whether he would recover.' Parkman reported that the old man 'had his Reason in a Considerable Measure while I was there, & freely & bitterly lamented his neglect of attending on the Lords Table. He said if it should please God to recover him, he would by no means neglect it any longer.'⁴⁴ Similarly, when the Reverend Samuel Dexter's father-in-law died he had never been to the Lord's Table, 'but Lamented his Neglect very much when he was visited [with seizures] the second time, & had proceeded so far, that if God had given Oppertunity he was to have been received into the Church the Sabbath before he dyed.'⁴⁵ Such promises occurred frequently, even when the dying person realized the potential for insincerity. When Daniel King's son was dying he mentioned 'the great hazard of a Death bed repentance and named a person he knew in Salem that in his late sickness had made great promises that he would reform and never sware any more that now was as bad or worse

42. Mather, *Thoughts of a Dying Man*, 40-41. See also [Cotton Mather], *Wholesome Words: A Visit of Advice, Given Unto Families that are Visited with Sickness* (Boston: D. Henchman, 1713), 17.

43. Foxcroft, *A Sermon . . . After the Funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Foxcroft*, 47.

44. Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, September 27, 1756, Parkman Family Papers, AAS.

45. 'Extracts from the Diary of Rev. Samuel Dexter, of Dedham,' *New England Historic Genealogical Register* 14 (1860): 112. See also Diary of Samuel Chandler, February 29, 1752, PEM.

than before.' The response of King and his son, however, was not to avoid such a fragile support for one's hopes, but to 'convince him and my self that his repentance was true.'⁴⁶ Thus, in moments of liminality, tensions within the religious culture emerged.

To be sure these repentances were well-meaning gestures, but they angered ministers nonetheless. When John Hambleton was dying, he called Ebenezer Parkman to help him in his repentance. Hambleton seemed sincere; he 'was very humble and broken for sin, full of passionate and repeated Crys to God and Christ, Sent for his Companions to ask their forgiveness, and to call 'em to repentance and to charge 'em to turn from sin to God.' But Parkman cast a pall over the tearful proceedings: 'I warn'd him of the Danger of trusting to [these actions] and how rarely a late Repentance was true, proceeding so much from the present Extremity, which forc'd it.'⁴⁷ Ministers would have had their parishioners live every moment of their lives as if they were about to die. Many lay people who were conscious of their inability to maintain such a standard opted instead for the solace provided by a dying repentance.

Likewise, a breach that ministers found troublesome was when a dying person desired assurance too strongly. While assurance of one's final estate was a comfort to the survivors, ministers generally regarded too great a confidence as somewhat unorthodox. Although no minister was present to be offended, the deathbed scene of Daniel King's son differed from the model scene along similar lines. When asked by his father if he was willing to die, Nathaniel replied that he was willing, but only 'if he was prepared for it.'⁴⁸ For Nathaniel the prospect of being unprepared for death left him only conditionally willing to die. In this vein he responded to his father's admonition that despair about dying was sinful, saying that 'he knew despair was wrong and that he hoped in Gods Mercy and did not despair of it but wished for assurance, oh if he

46. Diary of Daniel King, September 15, 1749, PEM.

47. May 31, 1740, Walett, ed., *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, 78.

48. Diary of Daniel King, September 15, 1749, PEM. Emphasis added. See also April 25, 1740, William Kidder, ed., 'The Diary of Nicholas Gilman' (Master's thesis, University of New Hampshire, 1972), 100.

could be assured of the Love of God he should be willing to Die.⁴⁹ In a manner similar to a number of others, Nathaniel King's desires on his deathbed contradicted the clergy's warnings that no one could have full assurance on their deathbeds.

Some lay people went beyond a mere desire for certainty and proclaimed themselves to be sure that they were saved with a self-confidence that was extremely irksome to ministers. Ebenezer Parkman recorded a number of these cases. In 1745 Parkman, visited a dying deacon who 'answer'd me with great readiness respecting his state, and said he had such Hope, and such scripture ground for his Hope that he was not afraid.' This dismayed Parkman, who 'gave him some Cautions, — Strait the Gate — few etc. — the many deceiv'd — the Heart deceitful — the wiles of Satan. . . .'⁵⁰ In another similar example one Williams was 'in Danger of Death by the threatning mortification of his Hand.' Parkman tried to get Williams to show some humility and fear as the result of his sinful life, but Williams remained optimistic about going to heaven. Parkman reported in his diary, 'Visited Neighbour Williams and desiring I might be alone with him, all left us, and I dealt in some plainness with him as to what I conceived to be his particular sins, but he entertains a great Deal of Hope concerning his Spiritual Welfare.'⁵¹ When Parkman visited Isaac How of Hopkinton, he could not help but be upset by 'his Insensibility of the amazing Wrath of God' and his 'being so comfortable in the apprehensions of Death notwithstanding his Impenitence.' How's nonchalance on his deathbed led to a further transgression of the model: 'Many had expected me to preach but I received no hint of his Desiring any thing of that. . . .'⁵² For some lay people, their fears of hell and dying throughout their lives led them on their deathbeds to the unscriptural belief in the certainty of their sainthood.

Isaac Backus, the Baptist minister of Titicut in southeastern

49. Diary of Daniel King, September 15, 1749, PEM.

50. June 21, 1745, Walett, ed., *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, 119–20.

51. Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, March 2, 1761, and September 13, 1760, Parkman Family Papers, AAS.

52. Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, June 28, 1742, Parkman Family Papers, AAS.

Massachusetts, also reported a number of cases of people on their deathbed being overly assured of their final estate. In 1755 Backus visited John Sambon, an 'apprentice who complains of being poorly.' To Backus's surprise Sambon opined that he was 'not afraid of being damned because he thinks he has such views of Gods goodness that [God] won't cast him off if he goes on to do as well as he can: and he said he should be glad if he should be taken with the Throat distemper and die!' This view perturbed Backus, who 'found need to rebuke him sharply, and tell him the danger of these snares.'⁵³ Likewise, when Backus visited John Cole's wife, who in 1764 was dying of consumption, she offered her belief that she was going to heaven. According to Backus, 'Sister Cole said "Wearisome nights are appointed unto me, but I trust I'm going where 'tis all day," and more to like purpose.'⁵⁴

Sometimes lay people reached this unorthodox conclusion through even more unorthodox means. In keeping with the lay tendency to attach significance to dreams and visions, a deathbed dream could provide one with powerful grounds for assurance. The example of Isaiah Pratt with which this article began demonstrates a lay person receiving assurance through a deathbed vision. Such visionary assurance was not considered orthodox, and Ebenezer Parkman asserted that 'these Things were not to be depended upon but that the Apostle Peter has caution'd us, saying that we have a more sure word of prophecy to which we should do well to take heed &c.'⁵⁵

Despite such ministerial injunctions, many lay people continued to place unscriptural emphasis on their visions, which, like Pratt's, usually involved the presence of Christ. In 1678 John Saffin's thirteen-year-old son Simon was dying of smallpox. After fifteen days of illness Simon's physician asked him how he was doing, to which

53. January 25, 1755, McLoughlin, ed., *Diary of Isaac Backus*, 364.

54. November 26, 1764, *ibid.*, 585.

55. *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, February 9 and February 11, 1742, Parkman Family Papers, AAS. For another statement of a minister cautioning against 'dreams in which are divers vanities,' see William Cooper, *The Beatifick Vision* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1734), 21.

Simon answered, "never better in all my life." The doctor, surprised by such an answer, asked him how this was so. "Why Because I shall be blessed to all Eternity," was the simple answer of the boy. Suspiciously, the physician inquired about how he knew such a thing. Simon replied, "Jesus Christ hath told me so, and I Dare not but beleive him." Simon's deathbed encounter with Jesus was an obvious comfort to him, for as he died he was filled not with groans and agonies but with 'Soul-Ravishing Expressions.'⁵⁶ Yet another deathbed vision came to a dying woman in Bellingham, Massachusetts. This woman seemed to have died when she abruptly opened her eyes. Gone was the previous look of terror, replaced with 'a peculiar splendor' and 'an uncommon & chearfull smile.' To the delight of those gathered around her deathbed she 'uttered or breath'd forth, these words following, viz: God is with me, 3 times over.' This vision of God's presence gave her the courage to bid her friends and family 'with an undaunted courage, Farewell, Farewell,' upon which she died.⁵⁷

In 1738 a young woman of twenty-one named Abigail Upham was dying in Malden, Massachusetts. On her deathbed she specifically requested a vision of Christ. When a friend of hers visited her one evening, she urged him, "Pray for me, that I might recover, if it be the Will of God; but especially that Christ might be revealed to me." The next morning the young man returned to find Upham in a peaceful frame of mind. "O our Prayers the last Evening were graciously answered," she said. "I have seen Christ, and he smil'd upon me: and now I am going." When her friend asked her where she was going, Upham, buoyed by her deathbed vision, optimistically replied, "I am going to Mount Zion, and unto the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable Company of Angels, &c."⁵⁸ Likewise, in 1766, Isaac Backus recorded the case of Samuel White, a young man who was

56. Caroline Hazard, ed., *John Saffin, His Book (1665-1708)* (New York: Harbor Press, 1928), 21-22.

57. Jonathan Mills Record Book, July 1747, MHS.

58. Joseph Emerson, *Early Piety Encouraged* (Boston: J. Draper, 1738), 22-23.

dying and in great distress for his soul. White expressed the model idea that a deathbed repentance risked insincerity. "I have delayed my soul concern," lamented the youth, "but, o, a sick bed is a poor time to prepare!" Through the night White carried on in a like manner, until the next morning when he cried out, "O what have I seen." According to Backus, when the observers pressed White for a description of his vision, 'he said he had seen Jesus, who appeared so lovely that he couldn't help loving of him, and went on to praise him and to warn and invite others in a wonderful manner for some hours.'⁵⁹ White was thus released from his earlier torment by a dying vision. People on their deathbed were not in the position to judge whether such visions were 'scriptural' evidence of being saved. Rather, on the brink of death, they took from these visions what comfort they offered.

A smaller number of lay people, usually but not always those deemed 'irreligious' by their more pious neighbors, went so far in their opposition to the model deathbed scene as to reject altogether the prayers or even the presence of a minister while they died. When David Hall, minister in Sutton, Massachusetts, visited a man who was sick with a terrible fever, the man's behavior was so uncongenial to Hall that it raised suspicions that he was 'Possessed with the Devil.' Hall, describing the man's offensive actions, noted that he 'refus'd to speak till asked if I should pray when he said no.'⁶⁰ Another impious man who had a similar reaction to his imminent death was George Hacket of Raynham, described by the Reverend Isaac Backus as a 'ringleader of frolicking.' After nearly two weeks of sickness Hacket approached his end, lamenting his sinful life. But Hacket apparently gave up any hope of reaching heaven, for 'at last he said "he didn't want any body to pray for him, for" said he "I shall be in hell before morning. The devil has got hold of me now and he'll soon have me there."' This breach of the model deathbed scene, where the dying person's hope for reaching heaven was crucial, angered Backus, who 'endeavoured

59. July 20, 1766, McLoughlin, ed., *Diary of Isaac Backus*, 641.

60. *Diary of David Hall*, October 14, 1752, MHS.

sharply to check' Hacket's sentiments.⁶¹ This scenê is also another example of religion failing to provide a person with solace as he approached death.

Occasionally this type of breach, with a person declining the minister's prayers, occurred as a result of the minister's actions. In 1756 Ebenezer Parkman paid a call on Noah How's wife, who was dying. After Parkman asked some 'very close and trying' questions, as was the norm, the woman responded tartly that his 'Discourse worry'd her desperately.' Because of this the dying woman decided that she no longer wanted the presence of the minister at her deathbed. In Parkman's words, 'Upon this I desisted, & bid her farewell, nor did either of them ask me to pray with them.'⁶² Other cases reveal that it was not always those considered 'impious' who refused prayers during their sickness. In 1717 Moses Prince, a young apprentice in Boston, noted in his journal the death of Grove Hurst: 'One thing here is worthy to be remarked by me that Mr Hurst was a Sober and pious man who was acounted eminently exemplary in his Life and conversation but in his Sicknes and so to his Death he would suffer no man to Pray with him. . . .'⁶³ An extreme example of this sort of transgression of the model deathbed scene can be glimpsed in Samuel Sewell's report of the death of a sea-captain named Crofts in 1702. According to Sewell, 'for Debauchery and Irreligion [Crofts] was one of the vilest Men that has set foot in Boston. Tis said he refused to have any Minister call'd to pray with him during his Sickness, which was above a fortnight.'⁶⁴ Sewell's remark that 'tis said' that Crofts refused to have a minister with him demonstrates that this was considered such a breach of the model as to be the subject of gossip. Although this type of breach did not occur very often, these cases reveal certain lay people finding greater comfort on their deathbeds without the potentially meddlesome presence of ministers. The signifi-

61. August 4, 1765, McLoughlin, ed., *Diary of Isaac Backus*, 384.

62. Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, October 7, 1756, Parkman Family Papers, AAS.

63. Diary of Moses Prince, October 28, 1717, call number BMS Am1832 (193), Houghton Library.

64. December 19, 1702, Thomas, ed., *Diary of Samuel Sewell*, 479.

cance of all these non-model deathbed scenes lies in their demonstration of some of the fault lines in lay/clergy relations, specifically in the areas of assurance, repentance, and the validity of dreams and visions.

INVERSIONS OF POWER

Ordinarily, ministers held the lion's share of the power in their interactions with lay people. Though lay people were not completely silent in their dealings with clergymen, the speech of ministers was indeed privileged, with time set aside several times a week during which the ministers dominated the dialogue. These usual power relations were altered, and sometimes wholly inverted, when a lay man or woman lay dying. Surrounded by supportive neighbors and family, faced with little prospect of earthly retribution, in a liminal space between this world and the next, dying lay people were often empowered to speak their minds. As he lay dying in 1741, one unnamed man summoned his courage and confronted his minister with an issue long troubling him. According to the clergyman, 'one thing I shall not forget I hope, [was] his observing to me that I had not for sundry years given him any perticular word of exhortation or inquir'd into the state of his soul from his mouth.'⁶⁵ *From his mouth*. For years this pious man had felt silenced in his dealings with his minister, waiting for the time when his pastor would ask him about his spiritual state. On his deathbed he could wait no longer; he was finally empowered to offer criticism from his mouth. Not all deathbed words were based on such pious desires, though. Sometimes the torrent of words that flowed out contained an undercurrent of heterodoxy: 'Capt Whipples wife is in a Strange condition, don't speak much nor don't care to see any Body. She says that she & her Husband & Children are all doom'd to damnation, & that the servant of the Family & all the Worlds Heathen & Mahomitans will be saved.'⁶⁶

65. Diary of David Hall, September 5, 1741, MHS.

66. Diary of Samuel Chandler, March 27, 1749, PEM.

This woman's deathbed scheme included not only the inversion of lay/clergy power, but Christian/non-Christian privilege.

Whipple's words reveal one final inversion as well: that of typical male/female power relations. To simplify greatly, gender in the early modern period was not considered to be dichotomous or fixed. Rather, gender categories were seen to be unstable, fluid, and based on convention; hence the prevalence of rituals of gender reversal and the practice of cross-dressing in the early modern Atlantic world, such as one would find in carnivals and charivaris.⁶⁷ The fluidity of gender, along with the liminality of the deathbed, allowed for temporary reversals of gendered power relations. This helps account for the significant fact that Whipple's words were listened to carefully and written down, for throughout this period women's speech was devalued in relation to men's speech.⁶⁸ Aside from conversion narratives, instances of recorded female speech are rare indeed, with one exception: examples abound of dying women's words. As the many examples — both of model deaths and non-model deaths — in this article demonstrate, men who ordinarily did not record examples of female speech in their diaries often wrote down the dying words of female family members and friends. Sometimes these words were even printed and distributed widely. When Grace Smith of Eastham, Massachusetts, died in 1712, her dying words were given greater power than her ordinary speech, for the speech she uttered on her deathbed was copied down and published as *The Dying Mothers Legacy*. The subtitle of this small book was as follows: 'Left as a Perpetual Monitor to her Surviving Children; as it was taken from her own Mouth a little before her Death, by the Minister of that Town where She Died.'

67. Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 6. On carnivals and charivaris see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 109–17; David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 39, 55, 100–101.

68. For a suggestive analysis of the devaluation of female speech in a slightly earlier period, see Jane Kamensky, 'Governing the Tongue: Speech and Society in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts' (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1993).

Again, these were words *from her own Mouth*. Even if these words were strictly conventional, with such advice as 'Dearly Love and Prize the Word of God,'⁶⁹ their female source was highly unconventional.

Not only did male-dominated society pay more attention than usual to the dying words of women, women felt themselves empowered to speak on their deathbeds in ways not otherwise typical of their gender. Mrs. Grice of Boston, because she was 'averse to hearing anything about her Soul, her sins, or another World,' grew impatient with her minister and 'us'd indecent Language.'⁷⁰ This was a gender inversion of sorts because, as Robert St. George has shown, women were less likely to engage in 'heated' speech in early New England.⁷¹ Elizabeth Price, also of Boston, was described by Charles Chauncy as rhetorically engaging in male speech—of a holier sort than Grice—on her deathbed. For a long time Price had been too sick to venture to the meetinghouse, a circumstance that upset her greatly as her mortal hour drew near. Price's eloquent speeches from her deathbed about desiring a meeting with God compelled Chauncy to link her with a male biblical figure: 'With holy *David*, her *soul thirsted for God, the living God*: and that was her complaint, "O when shall I come and appear before God!"'⁷² And although we do not know her name, when Lieutenant Dewey's wife died in Westfield in 1762 she left a memory of typically male speech. 'Her life was exemplary and her end peaceful,' wrote her minister, John Ballantine. 'She died like good old Jacob when he had made an end of commanding his Sons. Though she had been scarcely able to speak audibly for some time, yet the morning she died, she continued speaking to admiration

69. Grace Smith, *The Dying Mothers Legacy* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1712), 5.

70. August 31, 1749, Walett, ed., *Diary of Ebenezer Parkman*, 202.

71. Robert St. George, "Heated" Speech and Literacy in Seventeenth-Century New England,' in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, edited by David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984): 310.

72. Charles Chauncy, *Early Piety Recommended and Exemplify'd* (Boston: S. Kneeland & T. Green, 1732), 18. Price also used the power of the deathbed to invert conventional age hierarchies: 'tho' but in her 17th year, she was enabled . . . to correct the excessive sorrow of her distressed parents: minding them of the sovereignty of God; and . . . recommending to them the duty of submission.' Chauncy, 18.

for an hour and a ½.⁷³ Observers were not used to women 'commanding' and 'speaking to admiration' for such extended periods. Buoyed by the liminal power of her deathbed and its temporary inversion of gendered power, Dewey found a legitimacy attached to her words that probably had eluded her previously. Like Elizabeth Price before her, Dewey's words impressed her ministerial observer as suitable for a male biblical hero.

This dynamic is also demonstrated in the deathbed scene of Bethiah Walley of Ipswich. Perhaps during her lifetime Walley had difficulty commanding respect for her speech. In contrast, on her deathbed observers found her words highly important. In part, the significance placed on Walley's speech is evidenced by her brother, a minister, copying them down for posterity. He reported that 'she told a Friend a few Days ago to this Purpose, that she hoped she had not got the great Work of preparing for Death to do now, but that it was done some years ago.' Even more telling, as she spoke her final words her friends engaged with her speech and demanded a clarification. 'The last Words, which she was heard to say, which were in the Night past, were these: "Oh! redeem me," being asked by one of the Watchers, what she would be redeemed from, she answered, "From Sin."⁷⁴ Those who observed Walley's death wanted to be sure of what she meant by her dying words, for the deathbed transformed ordinarily marginalized female speech into the center of male and clerical attention.

Isaac Backus also recorded several cases of women's words being accorded great respect as they were spoken from their deathbeds. In 1755 Backus visited Elizabeth Deans, a young woman who had been ill for quite some time. On this day her friends gathered around her while Backus prayed. Despite her sickness Deans 'talked in a moving manner to her companions around her.' Commanding attention from her deathbed, Deans was able to affect

73. John Ballantine Diary, April 8, 1762, typescript at AAS. For further examples along these lines see Thomas Skinner, *The Mourner Admonished* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1746), 36-37; Foxcroft, *Sermon . . . After the Funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Foxcroft*, 45.

74. Diary of John Walley, January 20, 1748, MHS. For a similar example, see Cotton Mather, *Light in Darkness* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1724), 19.

those about her with her spoken words. Similarly, Backus described the deathbed eloquence of Mary Eaton, who after a long sickness described for those gathered the wonders of God's grace. As Backus wrote, 'And thus she went on for an hour or 2 praising God and admireing his goodness, and warning and inviteing others. I haven't heard a person talk more blessedly this long time.'⁷⁵ Significantly, Backus remarked that he had not heard another *person* speak so blessedly in a long time. Having acquired the power that accrued from her liminal position on the deathbed, Eaton's speech was no longer marginalized as distinctly female, but was accepted by those around her as the powerful words of a religious *person*.

Though hardly a model deathbed experience, one example from the Great Awakening lays bare the intertwined elements of death, gender, and power. Durham, New Hampshire, under the pastoral care of the radical New Light Nicholas Gilman, was the site of many unusual occurrences during the Great Awakening. Unlike most ministers in this period, Gilman was not opposed to giving credence to his parishioners' religious visions. A young woman named Mary Reed had had several such visions when she announced to Gilman on March 26, 1742, that she believed she was to die that night. Rather than being fearful of such a fate, Reed displayed an extraordinary equanimity: 'She was well content to bid the world and all Friends farewell. She directed Me that if she returnd No More to life I shoud Send for Her Cloaths and dispose of them to the Poorest persons in Town.' That evening, after retiring to bed, Reed 'fetchd many deep Sighs as tho' Her soul was departing, after which she lay Some time to appearance Breathless.' Shortly Reed's breath returned and she lay in a deep sleep the rest of the night.

Significantly, after Reed's encounter with 'death,' she assumed the power of a religious prophet. According to Phyllis Mack and Clarke Garrett, women in this period had an incentive to put their

75. September 10, 1755; October 17, 1754; McLoughlin, ed., *Diary of Isaac Backus*, 388, 350-51. See also 433-34.

words in a style associated with prophets, which helped them gain attention and increase their power.⁷⁶ Such was the case with Reed, for rather than being instructed by her minister, she used the power she gained through her near-death experience to offer him advice. Gilman was respectful in her presence:

I asked her—whether I ought to mind what men said of Me? She answered—No, No, Mind what the Spirit of Christ Says—Take Him for your Guide, and his Word for your Rule. He has a Great Work for you to do, but don't be afraid[,] He will carry you through it—after Some time when I was in My Study, She Sent to Me desiring Me to read the First Chapter of Jeremiah. Upon enquiring whether I was to read it to My Self she replied Yes, it is Sent to him and it is his Case. Afterwards she lay Blessing and praising God in whispers, in the Language of a Soul actually in Heaven.⁷⁷

Ministers in this period—radical New Light or not—did not generally ask women for spiritual guidance. Contact with death, however, increased the respect accorded to women's spiritual pronouncements. Reed, in fact, managed to escape the ironic bind of other women who gained power on their deathbeds. While Mrs. Grice, Grace Smith, and women like them gained power on their deathbeds, it was power of the most fleeting kind: within hours they were dead, unable to reap the benefits of their momentary inversion of traditional power dynamics. Mary Reed, on the other hand, experienced the best of both worlds. Granted power and respect due to her immediate contact with death, she lived to exercise that power. For at least nine months (and probably longer) after her experience, she continued to advise her minister about religious matters, going so far as to suggest biblical verses on which Gilman should preach.⁷⁸

The deathbed transformed ordinarily marginalized female speech—and lay speech and actions more generally—into the center of

76. Mack, *Visionary Women*, 107–108; Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 22.

77. March 26, 1742, Kidder, ed., 'Diary of Nicholas Gilman,' 256–58.

78. *Ibid.*, 300–301.

male and clerical attention. If Mary Reed's experience was not typical, her use of the deathbed to invert ordinary power dynamics was. The deathbed was contested terrain in early New England, with lay people asserting their various and occasionally unorthodox opinions in that setting. As a result there was not a single 'Puritan Way of Death'; there were many ways of death, and they expressed the range of lay attitudes about the most important questions in the religious culture: the possibility of assurance, the importance of resignation to God's will, the meaning of dreams and visions, the importance of prayer, the proper goals of repentance, the significance of a good death, and the relationship between superiors (men, clergy) and inferiors (women, laity).

Ministers developed a pattern of model deaths that, if emphasized, many parishioners followed. But when lay people on their deathbeds did disagree with their ministers, they were empowered to speak with a voice that was stronger than usual, since in liminal moments it was possible for resistance to orthodoxy to emerge. As the most liminal site in the culture, the deathbed stands as a symbol of the possibility of lay challenges to ministerial hegemony in eighteenth-century New England. Thus, in the century leading up to the American Revolution, lay people occasionally demonstrated on their deathbeds the latent antiauthoritarianism that would be mobilized in their break with the patriarchal authority of England.

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