“Monumental Circles” and Material Culture in Early Modern England

Patricia Phillippy

After William Bassett’s death in 1601, his widow, Judith, and his only daughter and heir, Elizabeth, erected a monument to his memory in St. Bartholomew’s Church, Blore (fig. 1). As is true of many joint tombs in post-Reformation England, the surviving spouse—most often the widow—commemorated her lost partner, but also created an effigial self-portrait in preparation for her own death.1 Judith survived her husband by nearly four decades, and she and Elizabeth probably initiated work on the tomb in 1630. Thus she lived with her effigy, a sculptural memento mori cast in her own image, for at least the last decade of her life. For Elizabeth, the tomb memorialized not only her parents, but also her first husband, Henry Howard, to whom she had been married as a teenager and who died in October, 1616, when Elizabeth was still no older than seventeen. Howard’s effigy lies alongside that of his father-in-law in a posthumous intimacy imposed by the two widows, since their husbands had not known each other in their lifetimes. Elizabeth, after all, was only two years old when her father died.2 At Howard’s head, Elizabeth has had the sculptor (probably Jasper Hollemans)3 depict her as a mourner for her husband, while at his feet a small stone coffin recalls the couple’s unnamed stillborn child. At her mother’s feet, a gabled stone casket is dedicated to another son, James Howard, who died in infancy. Finally, she has placed her surviving daughter, Elizabeth Howard—a teenager when the tomb for her father and grandparents was at last erected—at Judith’s head. With her veiled head resting hopelessly on her hand, she is in deep sorrow for her loss.4 The monument presented Elizabeth Bassett with an opportunity to create a family portrait of three generations, living
Figure 1. Jasper Hollemans (attrib.), Monument for William Bassett, St. Bartholomew, Blore (ca. 1630). Photograph by Phil and Anne Bassett, used by permission.
and dead, which would preserve the affective bonds uniting her mother, her daughter, and herself throughout their lives and in the afterlife.

As a collaborative work between mother and daughter, the monument is well-suited to a consideration of early modern women’s participation in “monumental circles”—communities of women who approached monuments as sites for writing and utilized the textual and sculptural components of monumental programs to represent themselves and others. Funeral monuments occupied a prominent place in the material culture of early modern England, and were objects of special importance to women, who often commissioned the works following the deaths of husbands, parents, or children. A surprising number of early modern women built multiple tombs for friends and family members, and a significant number authored monuments, as well as manuscripts or printed texts. In some cases, their female relations and descendants undertook similar activities. In this discussion, I trace the model of female authorship provided by the Bassett tomb into the manuscript poems of Elizabeth Bassett’s daughter, Jane Cavendish, where a similar approach to the material object as a site for women’s writing makes a compelling case for reading manuscripts and monuments as intimately related forms in early modern England.

Judith may have delayed commissioning her husband’s tomb until her fortunes improved with her daughter’s marriage to William Cavendish, then Earl of Newcastle, in 1618. Thus financial responsibility for the tomb, as well as some degree of creative control, probably lay with Elizabeth. The epitaph inscribed on William Bassett’s tomb may also have been authored by his daughter (fig. 2):

Here lyes a courtier, souldier, handsome, good,
Witty, wise, valiant, and of pure blood,
From William’s conquest & his potent sword,
In that same lyne many a noble lord,
That time hath lost in paying thus death[’s] debt,
As this unparalelld William Bassett.
But thy high virtues wth thy ancient name,
Shall ever swell ye cheekes of glorious Fame.
Here lyes a courtier, soveldier, handsome, good, witty, wise, valiant, and of pure blood, from William’s conquest, & his potent sword, in the same lyne many a noble lord, that time hath lost in paying this death, debt as this unparalelld William Bassett. But thy high virtues w’th thy ancient name, shall ever swell y’cheekes of glorious fame.

Figure 2. Jasper Hollemans (attrib.), Monument for William Bassett (detail). Photograph by Phil and Anne Bassett, used by permission.
The Bassett effigies poignantly illustrate the truism that the living will soon be counted among the dead: the two Elizabeths—presented here as grieving survivors—both died within three years of the matriarch, Judith. Before her death in April, 1643, Elizabeth Bassett became the mother of three Cavendish daughters—Jane, Elizabeth, and Frances—and successfully married her eldest daughter, Elizabeth Howard, to Sir John Harpur. Her daughter Jane is the chief author of a now famous manuscript of poems and dramas (to which her sister, Elizabeth Brackley, also contributed) written shortly after her mother’s and half-sister’s deaths.7

During the period of the manuscript’s composition, Jane was left as head of household, having lost her mother to death and her father to exile on the Continent following the defeat of the Royalist forces at the Battle of Marston Moor. The poems acknowledge these circumstances in their frequent addresses to Jane’s absent father and brothers. But the manuscript also reflects the influence of Elizabeth Bassett’s monumental project at Blore when Jane includes a series of poems devoted, as funeral monuments are, to constructing and preserving a family history that includes both living members and dead. Her poems for the dead may be seen as manuscript equivalents of the material epitaphs inscribed on her grandparents’ tomb.8 They begin with a poised, beautiful elegy, “On my deare mother the Countess of Newcastle”:

I had a mother, which to speake was such
That would you prayse you could not praise too much
For what of woman could bee perfect lov’d
But shee was that, & the true stile of good.
Then, in a word, shee was the quintessence of best,
And now sweete Saint, thy happy soule is at rest.9

The manuscript goes on to commemorate “Fowre brothers and a sister” already deceased (they are unnamed, but surely include James Howard, the infant memorialized on the Bassett tomb), her “sweet Sister the Lady Harpar” (Jane’s half-sister, her grandmother’s unhappy companion on the Bassett tomb), “my Grandmother the Lady Corbett” (Judith Bassett, who married Richard Corbett in 1603), and “my Grandfather Mr. Bassett”
Figure 3. Jane Cavendish, “On my Grandfather Mr. Bassett,” James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS Osborn b. 233, p. 34 (detail).
Jane’s elegy for her grandfather echoes the epitaph by her mother at Blore, describing Bassett as “a Gallant man & courtier true.” Jane then goes on, curiously, to link Bassett’s character to the times in which he lived:

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With all just honesty was earn your Life,
Soe choyse the Country being void of striffe,
To end your dayes in peace and soe to bee
A quiett soule in Life or death was thee.
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Unable to recall her subject’s character from first-hand experience, Jane appears to associate the silence of Bassett’s stone effigy with his quiet life and death, both of which occurred in and symbolize the stability of pre-Civil War England. The material effigy substitutes for and becomes memory.

As objects at once possessed and bestowed by early modern women, funeral monuments offered persuasive models of authorial creation and self-creation to later generations of women. Placed within the Bassett family chapel, both partaking in and constructing dynastic identity, the effigies at Blore anticipate Jane Cavendish’s creation of a textual family chapel in her manuscript, where her epitaphs respond to and continue her mother’s and grandmother’s authorial project. The interactions and products of the monumental circle comprised of the Bassett and Cavendish women suggest that early modern funeral monuments shared a spectrum of strategies for gender construction with other cultural and textual forms, but also offered a unique venue for women’s writing and a means for women to forge and preserve female alliances, both within families and beyond. As Margaret Ezell has noted, “For the Cavendish sisters, literature was a tool, one to link generations and to continue traditions.” Clearly this productive, utilitarian understanding of manuscript writing emerges from the maternal legacy inscribed in the material, monumental stone at Blore.

**Notes**

2. Judith married Sir Richard Corbett after Bassett's death, but was widowed again in 1606. Her daughter became a Ward of the Court, but was returned to her mother following Judith’s remarriage. See David Swinscoe, *Swinscoe, Blore and the Bassetts* (Leek, Staffordshire: Churney Valley Press, 1998).


5. Based on my preliminary research, this group includes Elizabeth Russell (d. 1609), Anne Clifford (d. 1676), Mary Penington (d. 1682), Frances Matthew (d. 1629), Elizabeth Tanfield (d. 1629) and her daughter, Elizabeth Cary (d. 1639), Alice Spenser, Countess of Derby (d. 1637), Alice Lucy (d. 1648), Constance Lucy (d. 1637) and her daughter, Elizabeth (d. 1690), and Elizabeth Ashburnham Richardson (d. 1651), in addition to Elizabeth Bassett (d. 1643), her mother, Judith (d. 1640), and daughters, Jane Cavendish (d. 1669) and Elizabeth Brackley (d. 1663), discussed here.

6. The collaborative nature of monuments poses challenges for authorial attribution. However, contracts indicate that women patrons were responsible for delivering heraldic and visual details, as well as textual elements, to tomb sculptors. See, for example, the contract between Lady Mary Morison and Nicholas Stone, reprinted in *The Notebook and Account Book of Nicholas Stone*, ed. Walter Lewis Spiers (Oxford: Walpole Society, 1919), 61–63.


8. Marion Wynn-Davies, “‘My Fine Delitive Tomb’: Liberating Sisterly Voices During the Civil War,” in *Female Communities, 1600–1800: Literary Visions and Cultural Realities*, ed. Rebecca D’Monte and Nicole Pohl (London: MacMillan, 2000), 111–28, argues that Cavendish’s and Brackley’s manuscript writings are permeated with images of death and mourning, and represent the besieged Welbeck Abbey as a metaphoric tomb. She attributes the sisters’ mourning exclusively to the absence of their male relatives. I suggest that their grief must also have been in response to their mother’s recent death, as Jane’s elegy for her mother affirms, and I see the Bassett monument as offering a material and textual model (in its inscribed epitaphs) for the elegies inscribed in the textual family chapel constructed within Jane’s manuscript.

9. Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley, “Poetry and Drama,” Yale Beinecke MS. Osborn b. 233, p. 31 (Rawl., p. 31). A second copy, with eight additional poems and the drama, *The Concealed Fancies*, is in the Bodleian, MS Rawlinson poet 16. I am using the Beinecke manuscript, but provide pagination for the Bodleian (Rawl.) as well. See Marie-Louise Coolahan, “Presentation Volume of Jane Cavendish’s Poetry,”
in *Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Poetry*, ed. Jill Seal Millman and Gillian Wright (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 87–96, for a comparison of the manuscripts, and for the argument that Jane alone is responsible for the poems, while her sister contributed to the dramas.

10. Yale Beinecke MS Osborn b. 233, pp. 31–2 and p. 34 (Rawl., pp. 31–32 and p. 34). Jane also memorializes her deceased relatives on her father’s side, including her great-great grandfather, Henry Ogle (d. 1581), her uncle, Gilbert Talbot, 7th Earl of Shrewsbury (d. 1616), her aunt, Mary, Countess of Shrewsbury (d. 1632), her aunt, Jane Talbot (née Ogle), Countess of Shrewsbury (d. 1625), and her grandmother, Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (Bess of Hardwick) (d. 1608). See Yale Beinecke MS Osborn b. 233, pp. 32–33 (Rawl., pp. 32–36).