‘Speaking Well of the Dead’

Characterization in the Early Modern Funeral Sermon

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Introduction

In depicting the character and personality of their deceased subject, English Protestant ministers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries employ features of writing strikingly comparable to contemporary works of fictional narrative. Such features include not only the selective inclusion of biographical details from the subject's life and death, but a spectrum of seemingly 'literary' devices such as the portrayal of multiple points of view through eyewitness 'testimonials', direct quotation of correspondence, poetry, diary entries, and vividly-realized deathbed scenes (some of which include dialogue).

These correlations illustrate the extent to which, as J. Paul Hunter has observed, such writing 'may be used to shape a “life” that has become independent of its funeral occasion and taken on an ethical and literary form of its own' (Hunter, 1990, p. 319). Hunter's invaluable investigation, Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction (1990), invites us to re-examine the shared origins of early modern fictional narrative and a host of contemporary popular genres including funeral sermons, spiritual biographies and the hagiographical 'lives' of saints and martyrs. The breadth of popular print culture from which the English novel emerges in the early modern period provides a remarkably rich cultural legacy, informing every feature of the genre, and ranging from scientific and political treatises to newssheets and ballads, spiritual biographies and conversion narratives, conduct works, sermonic and other popular religious literature. As these collected chapters demonstrate, many of the novel's component features – including though not limited to plot, character, mode, narration, perspective, temporality, and paratextual elements – are paradoxically unique even while their analysis usefully informs our consideration of parallel features in other forms of contemporary print, both literary and otherwise.'

1 In addition to Hunter's *Before Novels*, op. cit., important critical investigations of the novel's development in relation to other, both literary and 'non-literary' contemporary print, include
Broadly speaking, characterization presents certain challenges for narratological theory since narratology is formalistic and people do not easily lend themselves to systematic, formal, categorization. In the case of eighteenth-century novels, these challenges are exacerbated since narratological theory was developed in relation to modernist literature and does not comfortably accommodate historical texts (for which literary genre cannot be so rigidly defined). Notwithstanding the essentially ahistorical derivation of narratological theory, I shall suggest that consideration of modes of characterization employed in early modern funeral sermons will inform how narratological analysis of character might be applied to specific historical models, including both early modern prose fiction and non-fictional ‘specialist’ forms of narrative such as the published funeral sermon.

The most pressing issue to be dealt with here is the matter of applying theories of literary analysis – designed for the consideration of fictional characters – to ‘real’ people (specifically, the deceased individuals being commemorated in funeral sermons). I feel this approach is justifiable for several, distinctly different, reasons. The first reason is ahistoric, based on principles of human cognitive function; the second is historically and geographically specific to the early modern print culture in which both novels and published funeral sermons first gained significant popular recognition.

On the level of cognitive function, readers do not make formal or even particularly discernible distinctions between fictive and actual people when actively engaged in reading (or viewing, or hearing) about them. Paul Hernadi suggests that

information transfer among humans goes beyond simple semiotic encoding and decoding; it involves hermeneutic inferences as to the feelings, intentions, and beliefs of those sharing information. As we study the transfer of information among humans, impersonal notions of ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’ must be replaced by personalistic concepts of expression, communication, and representation (Hernadi, 2010, p. 57).

Hernadi goes on to assert that ‘there is no clear division between literary and non-literary signification’ (Hernadi, 2010, pp. 60, 62). Such an assertion


2 For discussions of the role of human cognitive function in the reading of fiction and non-fiction, see Zunshine, Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel; Hogan, Cognitive
reinforces Alan Palmer’s findings in *Fictional Minds* when he concludes that

Just as in real life the individual constructs the minds of others from their behaviour, so the reader infers the workings of fictional minds and sees these minds in action from observation of characters’ behaviour and actions [...] in various ways fictional minds are seen not as private, passive flows of consciousness, but as engaged, social processes of mental action (Palmer, 2004, p. 246).

Further support may be drawn from a concept central to cognitive psychology, that of ‘Theory of Mind’, the highly-evolved social capacity by which human beings feel they can understand the mental state of others on the basis of observable actions. Although the Theory of Mind function initially evolved in humans many thousands of years ago, to ‘decode’ authentic human behaviour, it is also precisely this function (cognitive psychologists argue) which later enabled the development of literature itself. As Lisa Zunshine has observed,

> The very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call ‘characters’ with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desire and then look for the ‘cues’ that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions. Literature pervasively capitalizes on and stimulates Theory of Mind mechanisms that had evolved to deal with real people, even as on some level readers do remain aware that fictive characters are not real people at all (Zunshine, 2012, p. 10).

If human cognitive function responds to real or fictive characterization in the same manner (regardless of readers’ awareness of the real or fictive nature of the person characterized), then there is no reason not to consider modes of characterization in relation to ‘real’ individuals.

The critical application of narratological models to historical, non-fictional, texts is comparatively rare, but it is not unprecedented (see, in


particular, Fludernik, 2004, pp. 129-54 and 2007, pp. 241-66). As works of nonfiction, even the simplest early modern funeral sermon presents a historical narrative, one which alludes to multiple points along a chronological timeline of ‘the past’. This frequently includes, at the very least, the days immediately before death, as well as episodes in the earlier life of the deceased, and very often Scriptural references which evoke more ancient periods of history. These multiple ‘pasts’ are distinguished in relation to a more collectively-experienced ‘present’ in which the deceased has died and congregational mourners are gathered together. The sheer complexity of the historical narrative(s) within a published funeral sermon merits further narratological analysis beyond the scope of this, introductory, investigation. Monika Fludernik, in particular, has provided an increasingly nuanced categorization of historical narratives in relation to the positing of experientiality (the representation of experience), and while her earlier investigations of nonfictional narrative found relatively little narrativity (compared with works of fiction), more recently she has concluded that ‘experientiality (and hence narrativity) occurs on a scale, and [...] the more academic a historical text is, the less experientiality there will be’ (Fludernik, 2010, p. 50).

I have two points to draw from Fludernik’s more recent estimation of the scope for narratological analysis of historical narrative. The first point supports the estimation of human cognitive function drawn above by Sunshine, Palmer and Hernadi insofar as it merely reiterates that a simple binary distinction between fiction and non-fiction is insufficient to scrutinize the representation of human experience. The second point is more problematic and poses potential obstacles in relation to the narratological analysis of funeral sermons; although I have suggested the published funeral sermon presents a complex form of historical narrative, it is one in which ‘experientiality’ plays a considerably lesser role than its more prominent functions as a sermon and as a portrait of an exemplary life. This second point is the subject for a much more nuanced analysis of funeral sermons than will be possible here, and does not exclude the viability of the project at hand so much as it seeks further clarification of the precise role of ‘experientiality’ in the narratological analysis of historical narratives in general, and published funeral sermons in particular.

My final justification for the narratological analysis of character in relation to the deceased individuals commemorated in published funeral sermons is more pertinent to the cultural and historical context of this particular book. All of the eighteenth-century English novels under consideration here were first published in a period when funeral sermons jostled
alongside works of literary fiction, biography, satirical ballads and poems, plays, newsheets, and other works, in which clear distinctions between terms such as ‘fact’, ‘fiction’, ‘romance’, and ‘history’ were often purposely blurred by authors who typically worked in more than one of these genres (on this subject, see McKeon, 1987, pp. 25-64). The cross-fertilization of early modern popular print – in literary genres and otherwise – offers far more analytical scope and insight into this cultural period than the later imposition of formalized critical boundaries between them.

Notwithstanding these several justifications, what follows is also posited with clear acknowledgement of the significant caveats needed in applying techniques and terminologies associated with narratological analysis of characterization to the early modern published funeral sermon. It will also be necessary, at the outset, to place this relatively neglected genre of popular sermonic literature into a more precise cultural context, particularly in its printed form.

Exemplary Lives and the Origins of the Protestant Funeral Sermon

It is precisely the representation of the deceased’s lived experience, as narrated by the minister through his published funeral sermon, which concerns us here. This textual component is integral to the overwhelming majority of Protestant funeral sermons in the early modern period. One of the ostensible purposes of the Protestant funeral sermon, that is, the exhortation of the living via narratives of exemplary spiritual conduct in those now dead, is fulfilled by the minister’s portrayal of the deceased as an individual whose character and conduct merits the particular attention of the congregation, or reader, in relation to their own life. Indeed, the inclusion of exemplary biographical narrative may be cited as a feature of many contemporary forms of popular writing in the early modern period, in which accounts of human experience serve as positive (or alternatively, in the example of Newgate confessional and other exceptions, admonitory) examples

4 There are some notable exceptions; see, for example, Samuel Acton’s 1699 funeral sermon for an anonymous infant, Benjamin Mills’ 1750 funeral sermon ‘on the occasion of the death of a Pious Young Person’, and Samuel Walker’s 1753 (second edition) funeral sermon for ‘a young man, who was drowned as he was bathing’.

for readers to follow (or avoid) in their own lives. The importance of the ‘exemplary life’ is such that some extant biographical narratives, specifically enhanced for publication, are published alongside funeral sermons – and this is often stated openly in the sermon’s preface, as in Richard Gilpin’s 1700 commemoration of Timothy Manlove (Gilpin). Such enhancements also indicate a reading public whose taste for didactic literature included a range of genres including, quite probably, both prose fiction and funeral sermons, thus reinforcing the potential for striking correlations between the modes of characterization found in these parallel forms.

It is relatively straightforward to identify when the English Protestant funeral sermon ‘began’ after the Protestant Reformation, yet its origins were not without controversy. According to the most stringent interpretations of early Calvinism, the Protestant funeral sermon shouldn’t exist at all; scriptural prohibition of clerical attendance at funerals in the first verse of the twenty-first chapter of Leviticus technically defined the act of burial as a civil, rather than ecclesiastical, office. Throughout the early modern period, Protestant ministers have been periodically subject to accusations of mercenary behaviour, or hypocrisy, for exchanging public endorsements of spiritual integrity for fame, favour, or profit – charges dangerously reminiscent of the Roman Catholic procedures which had been outlawed by the Protestant ecclesiastical courts (Tromly, 1983, p. 137).

The secularity of funeral sermons was further emphasized by their ancient, pagan, origins in the Classical cultural tradition, as a public function undertaken by a professional body of orators in Athenian society. Single out for particular criticism was the encomiastic rhetoric of such oratory, since ‘praise for the dead’ could be purchased (Tromly, 1983, p. 295). Despite the form’s pagan and Roman Catholic origins, these aspects came to be comfortably acknowledged in light of what the genre had to offer the reader, as Edmund Calamy makes apparent in his 1694 funeral sermon for fellow minister Samuel Stephens:

Though funeral orations had their rise from heathenish vanity, yet may they (provided all unjust commendation of the dead, and servile flattery of the living, be avoided) be exceeding useful, even among Christians, in helping to make the survivors [sic] better; there being nothing that more promotes the amendment of our lives, than the serious consideration and improvement of the departure of others (Calamy, p. 1).

This cultural transition was achieved through the form’s near-universal adoption of an asymmetrical bipartite structure in which the earlier (usually
larger) section was wholly dedicated to Scriptural exposition with little or no reference to the deceased subject whatsoever. Only the funeral sermon’s second, biographical, section served to commemorate notable aspects of the deceased’s life, death, and spiritual legacy. Although some exceptions to this structural template remain extant, these are strikingly rare during the long eighteenth century as a whole.

It is, arguably, this confinement of the biographical component to the sermon’s second section which allowed the form to achieve so much more popular recognition than merely a re-acceptance into the Protestant canon of religious literature. Frederic B. Tromly observes that less than twenty funeral sermons were published during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, but from the latter seventeenth century onwards, multiple editions – and also multiple versions – of printed funeral sermons for notable individuals (as well as those by particularly distinguished ministers) indicates the form’s burgeoning popularity within early modern print culture (Tromly, 1983, pp. 306, 311). Edward Pearse’s 1674 work *The Great Concern: or, A serious warning to a timely and thorough preparation for death ... recommended as proper to be given at funerals* serves as an example of the form’s popularity; the work reached its twenty-fifth edition by 1715 and was never out of print during the first half of the eighteenth century. Funeral sermons present one of the most recognized forms of popular religious literature in the early modern period, and in their published form, dominate a genre which Tony Claydon has observed was ‘among the commonest publications of the era [...] many sermons would have made it towards the top of seventeenth-century best-seller lists’ (Claydon, 2000, pp. 213-14). Because of their popular recognition, exactly contemporary with the genesis of the early modern novel, this chapter seeks to examine the potential for narratological analysis of published funeral sermons, and in particular, the modes of characterization employed both in novels and this form.

If Monika Fludernik has convincingly argued that narratological analysis may be applied to many forms of expression, both literary and otherwise, what is under investigation here concerns only the printed versions of funeral sermons – and thus not only the narrative discourse of Genette’s *narration* and *récit* but also the range of linguistic utterance possible via mediated (textual representations of) language, avoiding altogether the question of verbal and rhetorical ‘performance’ of sermons (a field of enquiry demanding a very different set of analytical instruments).⁶

The intrinsic value, in spiritual terms, of biographical narrative in both novels and published funeral sermons also supports Bruce Hindmarsh’s description of the period’s taste for popular religious literature as one which ‘witnessed a significant anthropocentric turn as theology increasingly concerned itself with the sequencing of salvation and mapped this understanding onto experience as an order of conversion’ (Hindmarsh, 2005, p. 15). A contemporary account of the spiritual biography’s value may also be found in the preface to Theodosia Alleine’s Life of Joseph Alleine, in 1672, in which Richard Baxter observes that ‘the Lives of Holy Men’ provide the reader with ‘God’s Image [...] not only in Precept, but in Reality and Practice; not Pictured, but in the Substance [...] the real Impress and Holiness in the Soul, is that living Image of God’ (Baxter, 1672, pp. 13-14). One aspect of the value of religious works containing biographical narrative is precisely this provision of a life with substance, specifically, the actual printed text of the funeral sermon itself. Indeed, in some quarters, the printed form of the sermon came to be valued in terms superior to its verbal counterpart. Plenty of extant evidence suggests the texts of published funeral sermons were given as gifts at funerals, a more appropriate gift – as argued by John Dunton in his 1692 commemorative anthology of notable deaths from history entitled The Mourning Ring – than the ‘bisquets, Gloves, Rings, &c’ traditionally given to well-to-do mourners attending the burial (Dunton, 1692). As Isobel Rivers has described, works such as Baxter’s own Christian Directory of 1673 and Theodosia Alleine’s 1672 biography of her husband extol the ‘personal, domestic, social, economic, and political advantages of reading over hearing, with particular emphasis on the freedom of the individual reader to choose books most suitable to his or her condition’ (Rivers, 1991, p. 116).

In turn, the importance of the individual reader’s role in deriving didactic benefits from the published funeral sermon is one shared with contemporary prose fiction (with Defoe and Richardson providing only the most obvious examples). This perspective lends itself to a view of contemporary readership in which, as Henry Godman observed in the preface to his 1688 funeral sermon for Elizabeth Kilbury, the reader must ‘act the part of a Pastor and Teacher unto thy self, and thy own Soul [...] since the Minister’s Application without thine own, will be little or no purpose’ (Goldman). As both novels and funeral sermons develop, quite consciously, as products of a culture increasingly saturated by print, both make implicit demands on authors who seek the means to convey to readers a viable sense of their

early modern sermons, see Fox, Oral and Literature Culture in England: 1500-1700 (2000).
moral authority. Characterization, employed both in early modern funeral sermons and early novels, provides one of those means.

In seeking to convey their moral authority via the medium of popular didactic literature, both minister-authors of funeral sermons and early novelists were subject to vociferous criticism of their hypocrisy and mercenary objectives. Critics of published funeral sermons included John Dunton in his 1707 poem *The Pulpit-Fool* as well as Daniel Defoe himself, who in his satirical *Hymn to the Funeral Sermon* remarks how ‘Pulpit-Praises may be had/According as the Man of God is paid’ (Defoe, 1703, p. 2). In 1745, an anonymous author in *A Brief Dissertation on Funeral Solemnities*, observes that

> [t]hough some regard should be paid to the old maxim, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, and we should not unnecessarily say anything contemptible of the dead, yet if ministers are enjoined to say something in a publick manner concerning a notorious, graceless villain, they ought [...] so to express themselves as not to poison the living (*A Brief Dissertation on Funeral Solemnities*, p. 26).

Such sentiments are far from uncommon, but the most vicious castigation of funeral sermons may be found in contemporary ministers’ own writing. In 1701 Philip Stubs defends the brevity of his own funeral sermon for Thomas Wright as a strategy to avoid the ‘tedious Heap of foolish, fulsome, false daubings (the too common Entertainment in many such Discourses as this) which whilst they are made for every body, do indeed fit no body’ (Stubs, 1701, p. 29). Hypocrisy in funeral sermons, Stubs continues, ‘damns all Religion as Craft and Cheat, and Priests of all Perswasions for a Mercenary Tribe’, while the corruption of the form has come to dissuade the ‘honest well-meaning Parishioner’ from even requesting a funeral sermon for his own burial since, ‘[h]aving seen the Sacred Place so often prostituted to the basest Flattery for filthy Lucre, [he] dares not run the risque of undue Mixtures in his Panegyrick’ (Stubs, 1701, p. 30).

Presented within a funeral sermon itself, however, Stubs’ arguments detract significantly from his own ability to praise the deceased subject, on whom he is forced to conclude, rather weakly, that

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7 The earliest critic of *Robinson Crusoe*, Charles Gildon, specifically attacks Defoe’s mixture of religious didacticism and fiction: ‘The Christian Religion and the Doctrines of Providence are too Sacred to be deliver’d in Fictions and Lies, nor was this Method ever propos’d or follow’d by any true Sons of the Gospel ... substituted in the Place of the Holy Scriptures themselves’ *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Mr. D- De F-*, of London...
[i]f any of this congregation knew of any remarkable failings in him (which God knows the best of us are subject to) those ye should industriously avoid: If any virtues which I have omitted, as unacquainted with them, those ye must endeavour to imitate [...] and that will be the best application of this part of my discourse (Stubs, 1701, p. 32).

The validity of the ministerial position, then, becomes increasingly paradoxical as the published funeral sermon simultaneously attempts to encompass both self-effacement and self-promotion (through publication). This moral conundrum, not dissimilar to that which taxed writers of early modern fiction such as Defoe and Richardson, continued to plague authors of published funeral sermons throughout the eighteenth century. The authority and durability so often associated with the written word are frequently invoked in funeral sermons, yet ministers’ seeming reluctance to publish – their insistence that publication was only undertaken under duress from mourning relations or congregations – is expressed so frequently in prefatory sections that accompany funeral sermons that such disavowals constitute a commonplace of the genre. Notwithstanding these ministerial apologetics, the vilification of ‘Hackney funeral sermons’ was at its most acute during the long eighteenth century and also has direct implications for the spectrum of characterization strategies employed by ministers in funeral sermons.8

Typology and Characterization in Funeral Sermons

This lengthy preamble concerning the origins and cultural status of the published funeral sermon in this period is provided in order to contextualize the more detailed discussion of characterization strategies which follows. Regarding the deceased persons whose biographical narratives constitute the vast majority of published funeral sermons, most are private individuals now largely unremembered by posterity, depicted through funeral sermons tailored to aspects of their public and professional identities. It is frequently possible to make correlations between certain professions and a typological series of virtues – such as the charitable merchant, the philanthropic physician, and so on. A significant majority of funeral sermons, however – almost half of the published funeral sermons still extant from the long eighteenth

8 The phrase ‘Hackney funeral sermon’ is employed by John Dunton in The Hazard of a Death-Bed-Repentance, Fairly Argued... (1708).
century – do not relate to the noble classes but instead commemorate peaceable and pious ministers, both those within the established church and various non-conformist denominations. Additionally, ‘virtuous Christian wife’ could be posited as a significant sub-category of funeral sermons, with a distinct typological and gender-based complement of prevailing characteristics.

For every typological classification of funeral sermons attempted (for example, by profession), there are inevitable and interesting exceptions. This is, obviously, because the recognition of an individual’s character in relation to their worldly profession represents a minute proportion of the myriad ways in which we might come to understand that individual. Notwithstanding this fact, to dismiss characterization in funeral sermons as a simple typological schema of human characteristics or professions, derived largely from the form’s classical antecedents, would be reductive and inaccurate. In funeral sermons, the scope for diversity of characterization within broad typologies is large (and far beyond the parameters of this investigation) but not all-encompassing. The admixture of traits and observable actions which contribute to the funeral sermon’s portrait of the deceased generally extends beyond one order of characterization. As in literary portraits, the sum of character is always greater than its typological parts, as was collaboratively observed nearly fifty years ago by Robert Scholes, James Phelan and Robert Kellogg:

There is more of myth and of fiction in Don Quixote than in Isabel Archer. There is more of mimesis in her. She may be quixotic, but he is Quixote. She may be typical, but he is archetypical. Yet, in their different ways, they both live. To suggest that one order of characterization is better than another is folly. To recognize that differences exist is the beginning of wisdom (Scholes, Phelan, and Kellog, 2006, p. 161).

More readily discernible across the whole genre of funeral sermons, however, is the near-universal inclusion of praise for the deceased. Praise almost always unites the qualities of the virtuous Christian with more singular features of the individual’s public identity. In 1798 Dr Joseph Harrison of Hatton Garden, for example, is conventionally depicted as ‘studious, diligent and indefatigable in his honourable profession as a physician [...] ever willing to deliver his healing balm to the poor and distressed without fee or reward’ (Proud, 1789, p. 18). Equally, patriotic, martial, and Christian values are seamlessly united in the commemoration of Sir Cloudesley Shovell in 1707, effusively praised for his efforts to ‘rescue the Honour of God and Religion, and vindicate the Laws and Glory of our Nation’ while exercising
those talents which ‘render’d him a Sanctuary to Friends, and a Terror to the Enemies of his Cause’ (Butler, pp. 6-7).

Shovell, now, is most often remembered as the unfortunate agent of the disastrous and arguably ignominious shipwreck which took his and many other lives in the Scilly Isles Disaster, and so the dubious praise expressed here – though common enough in published funeral sermons commemorating military figures – once again raises the possibility that the funeral sermon’s tendency to praise the deceased’s character compromises the overall sincerity of the genre. The ‘sincerity’ or authenticity of funeral sermons, however, is not within our remit here; what is significant for our consideration is that the interrogation of an individual’s profession in relation to their behaviour may well be deployed as a means of depicting character in other forms of literature, including novels. In other words, we should not concern ourselves with the question of authenticity or ‘truth’ in the representation of Shovell’s character so much as the means by which character is represented in published funeral sermons through an amalgam of attributes including, though not exclusive to, the profession or employment undertaken by the deceased.

Although exalted or noble social status is generally acknowledged with some deference in early modern funeral sermons, it is also common that members of the nobility are primarily praised for their private conduct as Christians, while aspects of their public, noble, or professional conduct are only subsequently acknowledged. In due deference to Christ’s synoptic gospels in Chapter 19 of Matthew, Verses 23-24 (‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’), this tendency of characterization is readily apparent in Daniel Burgess’ remark, concerning Elizabeth, Countess of Ranelagh, that ‘[o]f the Honour of her Parentage […] I say not anything […] Though, in the World these do make great Figures, the Church takes them for no more than Cyphers’ (Burgess, p. 72). His categorical dismissal of her worldly attributes is immediately followed by a five-page description of the lady’s Christian qualities, including ‘Spiritual Understanding’, ‘Holy Affections’, and ‘Universal Godliness’. It remains impossible to know, now, whether this characterization reflects any authentic sense of the deceased’s character, but it does represent one means by which funeral sermons mitigate categorization of ‘character’ by public or social status (noble, wealthy, privileged) with praise for Christian virtues.9 Here, some correlation with fictional

9 Other examples include Birch, A funeral sermon on…Grace Lady Gethin; Skynner, A sermon preached at the funeral of Baptist Earl of Gainsborough…
works can be found in the early depiction of Squire Allworthy, in which Henry Fielding combines the natural virtues of ‘an agreeable person, a sound constitution, a solid understanding, and a benevolent heart’ with secondary acknowledgement of Allworthy’s possession of ‘one of the largest estates in the country’ (Fielding, 1968, p. 53).10

Non-Typological Modes of Characterization in the Early Modern Funeral Sermon

The remainder of this chapter will focus on two quite exceptional, though markedly different, detailed examples of characterization in published funeral sermons. These examples challenge, further still, any received notion that funeral sermons’ modes of characterization are ‘merely’ typological or encomiastic in nature. The first is derived from Bishop of Salisbury Gilbert Burnet’s 1692 funeral sermon for eminent Fellow of the Royal Society Sir Robert Boyle. During the course of a lengthy description of the deceased’s well-known piety, Burnet observes that

the very name of God was never mentioned by [Boyle] without a pause and a visible stop in his discourse, in which one who knew him most particularly above twenty years, has told me that he was so exact, that he does not remember to have observed him once to fail in it’ (Burnet, 1692, p. 24).

What is immediately striking about this seemingly minor detail (that is, a notable tendency to pause after naming God, as well as confirmation of this habit via a lifelong friend) – which is included within a much more elaborate portrait of Boyle’s religious character – is its idiosyncratic nature and, related to this, how ostensibly ‘useless’ this detail of characterization would be as moral or spiritual exemplar. Burnet’s detailing of Boyle’s idiosyncratic verbal ‘tic’ does, however, offer a vivid sense of the deceased’s Christian fervour, and so still fulfils the ostensible didactic purpose of the funeral sermon in depicting the (spiritual) character of the deceased for the benefit of readers. Nevertheless, there is no discernible spiritual benefit to be gained from pausing after naming God, or in emulating the behaviour of one who does.

10 A further consideration of exemplary character in novels and related concepts of ‘type’ and ‘case’ may be found in Clemens Lugowski’s *Form, Individuality and the Novel*, in particular his discussion of ‘The style of Wickram’s cautionary novels’, pp. 116–38.
Yet the opposite point – that literary fiction sometimes adopts the more conventional (exemplary) modes of characterization generally seen in funeral sermons – is certainly apparent and demonstrates the rarity of Burnet’s particular mode of characterization considered here. Idiosyncracies in the depiction of fictional characters are common enough; often, however, these serve to reinforce rather than undermine prevailing features of the character under scrutiny. Squire Allworthy’s refusal to remarry, or Uncle Toby’s reluctance to kill a fly, present just such exemplary qualities in the form of idiosyncracies; in the case of Allworthy,

he would often talk a little whimsically on this head: for he sometimes said, he looked on himself as still married, and considered his wife as only gone a little before him, a journey which he should most certainly, sooner or later, take after her; and that he had not the least doubt of meeting her again, in a place where he should never part with her more (Fielding, 1968, p. 54).

Here, Fielding elaborates further the moral and religious integrity of his subject in terms of his steadfast fidelity and Christian resolve, and does so in a manner which might be emulated by others (in not remarrying after the death of a first spouse). Similarly, Uncle Toby’s benign behaviour towards flies might be emulated by others in a manner which Boyle’s verbal pausing would not.

Elsewhere in the funeral sermon Burnet offers a more conventional encomiastic portrait of Boyle’s spiritual integrity, described at length in the pages preceding and following the detail of the verbal idiosyncracy. Taken together, the exemplary traits and the idiosyncratic one are closely aligned to Burnet’s repeated observation that the deceased was a singular and remarkable individual, ‘one man among a thousand have I found’ (Ecclesiastes Chapter 7, verse 28), intellectually brilliant and innovative in the application of his mental faculties, and thus not so much an example for ordinary men to copy but one simply to admire (Burnet, 1692, p. 6). As Burnet expresses it,

The different degrees and ranks of men, with relation to their inward powers and excellencies, is a surprising but melancholy observation; many seem to have only a mechanical life, as if there were a moving and speaking spring within them, equally void both of reason and goodness. The whole race of men is for so many years of life, little better than encreasing puppits [...] (Burnet, 1692, p. 6).
Fitting praise indeed for one of the greatest minds of the new sciences, but hardly intended to inspire readers to imitate Boyle’s example. Burnet continues, however, in a vein which allows for a more encouraging perspective on mankind’s potential for greatness:

But as there is a dark side of humane nature, so there is likewise a bright one, the flights and compass of awakened souls is no less amazing. The vast crowd of figures that lie in a very narrow corner of the brain [...] The strange reaches of the mind in abstracted speculations, and the amazing progress that is made from some simple truths to theories, that are the admiration as well as the entertainment of the thinking part of mankind (Burnet, 1692, p. 7).

Ultimately, Burnet’s depiction of Boyle’s ‘exceptional’ character, if not exemplary, offers readers the opportunity to be more indirectly inspired, and much greater scope to reflect productively upon the chiaroscuro of ‘Humane Nature’ and the capacity for ‘amazing progress’ in some men’s minds.

My second example offers an entirely different method of characterising the deceased subject, one heavily influenced by aspects of the published funeral sermon which remain formally separate from the main body of the sermonic text (specifically, the title page and preface). In fictional texts, such narrative components can be described in Genette’s terms as part of the ‘paratext’.11 In Thomas Easton’s 1692 funeral sermon for John Melford, a young man who died after a fall from a horse at the age of eighteen years, the minister’s preface makes clear that the whole purpose of publication is to quash the false and heinous rumours which spread subsequent to the sermon’s original reading at Melford’s internment. In his published text, Easton states that the document in the reader’s hands is in ‘exactly the same Method and Language that ’twas first written, without so much as altering a sentence, scarce a single word’ (Easton). It seems that, following Melford’s funeral, local gossip had suggested that the deceased’s accidental death occurred through inebriation and, in direct response to these rumours, Easton states in the preface to his published funeral sermon that he ‘was personally with [the deceased] within one hour [after the fall], and neither his relations, nor myself, nor other friends could in the least suspect [the deceased’s being drunk]’ (Easton).

11 For a discussion of the definition of Genette’s paratext, see Genette and Maclean, 1991.
We are not in a position to know if Easton is truthful in asserting that the text of this funeral sermon is identical to that which he originally preached, nor have I been able to find any other information concerning John Melford in order to interrogate Easton’s depiction of him. This is not really the point; what concerns us here is that the strategies of characterization deployed in the printed version of this funeral sermon, portraying the character of the deceased John Melford, are mitigated by Easton’s prefatory remarks as well as the sermon’s title page (both of which would be encountered by readers prior to their reading of the main sermonic text). Specifically, Easton’s title page makes reference to Chapter 13 of *Luke*, Verses 2-5, in which the disciple considers the fate of the eighteen innocent Galileans crushed to death when the Tower of Siloam collapsed. This allusion to the innocence of those who sometimes die a premature, if accidental, death might seem to relate simply to Melford’s actual cause of death (a violent fall) but the contents of Easton’s title page and preface were added for publication, and differ entirely from the key Biblical text for the original funeral sermon.12

In seeking to quash the ugly rumours that Melford’s violent death was a divine judgement on the sin of drunkenness, Easton’s title page is further annotated with the solemn observation that ‘Strange Judgements don’t always infallibly denote the sufferers to be extraordinarily guilty’, thus tacitly warning readers not to misconstrue the meaning of the narrative which will follow.

Moreover, in his preface, Easton draws attention to his own circumstances, rather than those of the deceased, when he alludes to St Paul’s frustration in *Galatians* 4, Verse 16, commenting that ‘Mine is a Worse Case’, since it is his duty to correct others’ misinterpretation of sin (Easton, 1692). In short, Easton provides a spirited defence of the deceased’s character, not through his narrative discourse (since this ostensibly comprises merely the reiterated content of the oral version of his sermon), but instead, in his prefatory remarks and title page. Such a strategy is further notable in terms of funeral sermon characterization because the sermonic content is specifically deployed in printed form as a means of more accurately depicting the character of the deceased. In a comparative manner, in eighteenth-century popular fiction, Defoe, Richardson and Fielding all offer paratextual or prefatory discourses in

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12 Easton’s original Scriptural text (which proceeds directly after his preface) offers a considerably more anodyne reflection on Melford’s death from *Psalm* 103, Verses 15-16: ‘The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more’. 
order to clarify or direct readers’ understanding of the narrative which follows.

Taken together, the character portraits of Sir Robert Boyle and John Melford demonstrate the sheer diversity of characterization techniques apparent in a hitherto largely neglected form of print culture, in particular, one which enjoyed such a notable level of contemporary popular recognition in parallel with early modern works of literary fiction. It remains to be seen how best to address the vexed question of ‘genre’, whether ‘literary’ or otherwise, in considering the scope for narratological analysis of early modern texts.

**Conclusion**

In the introduction to this chapter I offered a series of reasons justifying the application of narratological modes of character analysis to a nonfictional historical genre. Some of these reasons were ahistoric and related to human cognitive function (broadly: humans do not distinguish, much, when reading about fictional versus nonfictional characters). Moreover, perceived as a complex form of historical narrative, funeral sermons might also be conducive to narratological analysis although it remains to be seen what precise role is played by ‘experientiality’ in this particular (sermonic) genre of nonfiction.

As relevant to both its Classical origins and its radical reformation through the Christian and subsequently Protestant didactic traditions, the funeral sermon bears witness to the character of the deceased almost wholly in terms of exemplary, and spiritual, conduct (whether positive or negative), and for didactic purposes. This is not to say that extraordinary individuals – such as Robert Boyle – are not recognized for their singularity of character, nor that unusual modes of characterization (such as those used by Thomas Easton to depict John Melford) are not extant. Funeral sermons are, however, principally concerned with the spiritual dimension of the deceased’s character. Yet near-identical modes of characterization are readily apparent in myriad contemporary forms, including Newgate confessions, spiritual biographies, and early novels. In terms of the true scope for narratological analysis of characterization, it is this wider context of historical and biographical narratives in early modern print culture, in which both funeral sermons and the novel found popular recognition, which invites our further scrutiny.
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Criticism


