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Alexis Grainger
Montclair State University

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Abstract

Modernist writer Sylvia Townsend Warner satirically immortalizes fictive English subjects, most of whom are female, in her epitaph poetry. Writing in the voices of the deceased, their survivors, and, in some cases, the omniscient third person, Townsend Warner places each buried body back into the heterosexual domestic paradigm, thus critiquing earthly gender roles and expectations in these eternal etchings on the metaphoric gravestone. Rather than escaping their material conditions, the deceased are re-homed by Townsend Warner, though not in any romantic way. In these pithy epitaphs, the burial site mirrors the domestic site as it assumes the politics of marriage, childbirth, and childrearing and reveals domestic tensions, some intensified and others resolved by the respective subjects' deaths. Judith Butler's theories of gender, its prescription, and its enactment provide a useful framework through which to examine Townsend Warner's irreverent posthumous representation of these deceased English women, men, and children doubly buried by the highly gendered language of their metaphoric but distinctly material epitaphs.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Marital and Maternal Mourning: Gravesite Domesticity in Sylvia Townsend Warner's

"Epitaphs"

by

Alexis Grainger

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty

of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

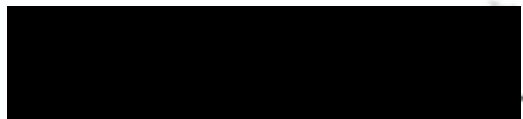
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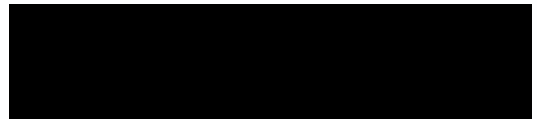
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

Department of English



Dr. Lucy McDiarmid
Thesis Sponsor



Dr. Jonathan Greenberg
Committee Member



Dr. Monika Elbert
Committee Member

MARITAL AND MATERNAL MOURNING: GRAVESITE DOMESTICITY IN SYLVIA
TOWNSEND WARNER'S "EPITAPHS"

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

Alexis Grainger

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2021

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I. Introduction

As her *Selected Poems* collection was slated for publication in the late 1970s, Sylvia Townsend Warner proclaimed, “I presume to be a posthumous poet.” A musicologist turned writer, Townsend Warner composed several works of prose and poetry during her lifetime, most of which received little to no recognition until shortly before her death in 1978. Second-wave feminists embraced the English writer’s works, though mostly her fiction, the subversive themes of which were influenced by her own communist politics, early feminist ideals, and unapologetic lesbianism. Her poetry, however, remains largely understudied, especially when compared to the works of her contemporaries such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.¹

In her two earliest collections of poems, *The Espalier* (1925) and *Time Importuned* (1928), Sylvia Townsend Warner writes poetic gravestone inscriptions which she simply titles “Epitaphs.” Described by a reviewer as having “an un-Victorian mind” (Harman 3), Townsend Warner distances herself from the unfashionable sentimentality of Victorian heroic poetry and lightness of Victorian comic verse without disregarding formal meter altogether. Instead, she composes her distinctly modernist “Epitaphs” in quatrains of iambic tetrameter with an AABB rhyme scheme to satirically versify the otherwise unpoetic lives of fictive English subjects. Commemorating these subjects’ lives in her pithy gravestone poems, Townsend Warner varies the epitaphs’ speakers from the deceased themselves to their next of kin to even an anonymous third person, yet in every voice she employs domestic vocabulary to resituate each buried body into the metaphoric confines of the home.

Townsend Warner’s epitaph poetry remains faithful to the age-old resting/death metaphor while simultaneously introducing wholly unromantic social commentary through the dynamics

¹ There is very little critical commentary published on Townsend Warner’s work. Maud Ellman, Jan Montefiore, and Jane Marcus, among a slowly increasing number of scholars, have primarily written about her novels and diaries.

of not only the bedroom but also the wider home as the site of marital struggle and parental failure. She irreverently immortalizes the domestic tensions which strained the private lives of those now dead in a backwards glance at the mundane rather than a swift release into the spiritual. Her very frank exposition of these socially suppressed tensions as gravestone inscriptions eternally publicizes the provocative private lives of the dead and, by association, the lives of their survivors. Of particular interest, too, is the perpetuity of the gravestone metaphor, each four-line poem acting metaphorically as an epitaph on the page. Townsend Warner deliberately layers these poems with a public gravestone metaphor to call attention to the way social conditions become inscribed on the body. In his study of English poetic epitaphs, Joshua Scodel suggests that “[the funerary monument and its epitaph] contribute to the continuous reconstruction of the social order by acknowledging the reality of death while proclaiming the posthumous existence of certain persons and the social values they represent” (2). Townsend Warner, choosing mostly female figures as her poetic subjects, reconstructs the earthly social order and highlights the way gender is socially constructed, prescribed, and, upon successful naturalization, inscribed in her contemporary English society.

A humorous and skilled poet, Townsend Warner uses the poetic epitaph genre not only to reconstruct social order but also to criticize it. Scodel considers the subversive potential of this style of writing: “As a literary genre the poetic epitaph exploits both the distinctive features of verse and its own specific conventions in order to define the dead in ways that not only reinforce but also extend, challenge, and reshape prevailing cultural assumptions” (2). The cultural assumptions Townsend Warner seeks to “extend, challenge, and reshape” primarily concern iterations of gender, more specifically the definition, regulation, and repression of the female. In her 1991 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler defines

gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (179). Butler’s definition of gender hinges on the idea that gender is “tenuously constituted in time,” though the “*stylized repetition of acts*” seeks to naturalize gender as a timeless concept in order to create “the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (179). In Townsend Warner’s poems, the gendered content works not only to create but also to eternally solidify this illusion.

Butler’s definition of gender and its performance transcends mere illusion as she imbues it with ghostly qualities, gender becoming something “phantasmatic, impossible to embody” (179). The idea of the “phantasmatic” gender introduced by Butler implies that gender is a sort of “living dead,” an internalized externality. While the gravestone marks the location of a body of a person once living, the epitaph is “phantasmatic” as it serves to briefly recount that person’s acts in life through either a first- or third-person voice and thus reflects the attitudes and beliefs of its speaker. Townsend Warner further plays with the physical positioning of the gravestone and its epitaph in order to expose the arbitrariness of gender identity. Butler concludes, “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a ‘ground’ will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time” (179). Applying this directly to the idea of epitaph poetry, the ground between the body and the epitaph, between the person and the gendered performance, is unstable, and Townsend Warner further destabilizes it as descriptions of the dead reveal the epitaphed gravesite to be haunted not by any ghost of the deceased but rather by contemporary iterations of gender.

While gender is a social phenomenon according to Butler, the material conditions of gender are physical, deliberately corporealized. Townsend Warner’s male and female subjects,

no longer corporeal, still metaphorically shoulder the weight of gender norms and expectations in the distinctly domestic, doubly temporal poetic gravesite. In both “Epitaphs” collections, Townsend Warner assumes spousal and parental voices with which she comically understates the seriousness of death as she depicts the burial site as an extension of the modern heterosexual domestic site, deadened itself by discontented patriarchs, ignored matriarchs, and children departed either far too soon or not soon enough. Employing naturalistic metaphors, literary and historical allusions, and domestic vocabulary in her composition of the two sets of “Epitaphs,” Townsend Warner sardonically critiques the gendered politics of marriage, childbirth, and childrearing.

II. Epitaphs of Two Mothers and One Matriarch

In the first of the 1925 “Epitaphs,” Sylvia Townsend Warner presents the epitaph of Melissa Mary Thorn through what seems an anonymous third person voice. She opens the set:

Here lies Melissa Mary Thorn

Together with her son, still-born;

Whose loss her husband doth lament.

He has a large estate in Kent. (from “Epitaphs,” *The Espalier*, 1-4)

The rather objective opening couplet “Here lies Melissa Mary Thorn, / Together with her son, still-born” (1-2) reveals that Melissa Mary Thorn died during childbirth, thus implying that her husband has buried both his wife and his still-born child together. Townsend Warner confirms this in the third line: “Whose loss her husband doth lament.” The syntax here is tricky: the phrase “whose loss” could refer either to the father’s loss of the son through the mother’s inability to carry the child to term, “whose” here referring to Melissa Mary Thorn and the “loss” referring to the still-born child, or to the loss of the mother herself, both words of the phrase “whose loss” pairing to reference the mother. The phrase likely does not refer to the loss of both because it is singular. This syntactic complication prompts a shift in point of view from objective to subjective as it indicates her husband’s involvement in the composition of the epitaph.

Still maintaining an air of anonymity in the voice, Townsend Warner quietly reveals the speaker to be Melissa Mary Thorn’s husband as the epitaph turns from a lamenting ode to a dating advertisement in the last line: “He has a large estate in Kent” (4). The husband’s smug, matter-of-fact interjection in the mention of his “large estate in Kent” (4) on his wife’s epitaph points to the idea that the loss he “doth lament” (2) may refer to the loss of his wife, but his

mention of his lamentation proves disingenuous. What was their shared domestic space has become public in the form of a personals advertisement.

Townsend Warner mocks the husband's feigned woe for the loss of his wife and son with this curt turn to his most valuable asset, an estate in which he lives alone, to show the way in which the domestic space itself no longer confines the husband socially. Pitching the idea of his house to his next potential spouse, the husband ignores the semi-uninhabitable domestic situation of his wife and child's combined grave. The female body is inextricably tied to the dead child's body, both in their shared metaphoric grave and in the shared content of the epitaph. Melissa Mary Thorn's inability to carry a baby and become a mother haunts her eternally. As a pregnant woman at the time of her death, she is perpetually marked by her stillborn child—by her failure to protect, carry, and give birth to this baby. Butler critiques the way sex and gender become intertwined when discussing motherhood, noting the way paternal law presumes women to possess inherent maternal desires on account of the reproductive capacity of the cis-female body:

when the desires that maintain the institution of motherhood are transvaluated as pre-paternal and pre-cultural drives, then the institution gains a permanent legitimation in the invariant structures of the female body. Indeed, the clearly paternal law that sanctions and requires the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of its reproductive function is inscribed on that body as the law of its natural necessity. (118)

The projected ontological connection between the cis-female body's reproductive capacity and maternal desire presents itself in Townsend Warner's poem as, now dead, Melissa Mary Thorn fails to carry her child to term and is thus stripped of a voice in an epitaph not even entirely her own. Sharing the first two lines with her stillborn son and being dropped entirely in the last two lines, Melissa Mary Thorn hardly populates her own gravesite. Effectively, the matter of fact

opening line “Here lies Melissa Mary Thorn” (1) is as close to eulogizing as the epitaph comes. This is the only line devoid of judgment and, by no coincidence, the only line without a male presence.

Rid of Melissa Mary Thorn, her name itself a possible allusion to the idiom “a thorn in his side,” the husband has a large estate to himself, a bachelor’s paradise of sorts in the pastoral southeast England county. The husband implicitly indicates that no claims exist to this property or, by association, to his wealth in the mention of the male gender of the still-born baby in the second line. Further, the husband refers to the son as “her son” only, avoiding mention of his parentage. With no male heir, the husband is entirely detached from the family and the familial line of property succession. In other words, the husband no longer bears any legal ties to his first marriage and is free to seek out another wife with whom he can populate his “large estate in Kent.” As for his wife and her still-born son, they lie cramped together in one small grave.

Melissa Mary Thorn’s epitaph has a parallel in Mary Grove’s epitaph in the *Time Importuned* collection. Townsend Warner presents the same marital dynamic: an implicitly disgruntled husband eulogizing his dead wife and children in an explicitly critical epitaph. In this epitaph, Townsend Warner shrouds the domestic imagery in an apian metaphor, relying on the natural architecture of a beehive to explain the domestic conditions of Mary Grove’s grave.

Townsend Warner writes in the husband’s voice:

Within this narrow cell is hived

The sweetness, wedded but unwived,

Of Mary Grove, whose loss I rue.

And here our babes lie buried too. (from “Epitaphs,” *Time Importuned*, 13-6).

The husband metaphorizes the grave as “this narrow cell” (13), an allusion to the small cell of a honeycomb in a beehive—the structure itself here working through the verb “is hived” (13)—in which bees store their honey, or “the sweetness” (14). While it appears the husband is calling Mary Grove “sweetness” as a term of endearment, he makes clear his dissatisfaction with Mary Grove’s wifeliness, describing her as “wedded but unwived” (13). The word “wedded” makes clear that Mary Grove is the speaker’s spouse in accordance with the objective legal definitions of marriage; however, by turning “wife” into a verbal adjective and negating it with the prefix “un,” the husband expresses that Mary Grove may have been his spouse but she has specifically not been his wife—wife here having the physically and emotionally taxing connotations of servant, caretaker, and producer of children.

Unlike the Melissa Mary Thorn epitaph rife with ambiguous determiners, Townsend Warner makes clear the person whom the speaker laments. “Whose loss I rue” (15) refers directly to the loss of the speaker’s wife Mary Grove. The verb “rue” itself intensifies the speaker’s expressed sorrow by implicating him in her death in some way, actively or passively. This is not to say that the husband has killed his wife, but it does indicate that Mary Grove could not carry her and her husband’s children to term and, further, could not perform the naturalized wifely duties he expected of her. Assuming partial ownership of his dead children through the possessive pronoun “our” preceding the word “babes” in the poem’s fourth line, the husband notes his involvement in her death, the involvement being through his sperm which fertilized her eggs to conceive the babies whose birth killed her.

If the husband is at fault for his role in producing the children that killed her, so, too, is Mary Grove herself, and he makes this clear in the very first line. The word “cell” itself functions not only as an allusion to apian domesticity but also to penal domesticity in the form of

a jail cell. “Narrow,” the cell encloses the unwifely, unproductive body and labels it criminal. The spatial adjective used to describe the cell further suggests Mary Grove’s cis-female body that could never be productive in its narrow physicality; to survive, the “babes” (especially in a multiple birth scenario) would require a wide-hipped bodily environment conducive to the development and nourishment of their bodies. Despite having a name suggesting a productive natural landscape, Mary Grove carries no children to term, thus unwifing herself and being laid to rest in a cramped grave with her multiple still-born babies.

A dead matriarch overseeing three future generations speaks for herself in the penultimate epitaph of *Time Importuned*, but her struggle remains familial: her offspring ignored her in life and suffer the consequences, still unbeknown to them, in her death. Townsend Warner makes gynocentric the predominantly androcentric Arthurian myth, opening Sarah Delabole’s epitaph with an explicitly feminine lineage chart before mentioning her inherited earthly possessions and now lost tales:

I, Sarah Delabole, espied

My daughter’s daughter’s child a bride.

They value yet my hard-won gear,

My lore not so, and that lies here. (from “Epitaphs,” *Time Importuned*, 17-20).

Sarah has a daughter, a granddaughter, and an unmarried great-grandson, here infantilized and desexed through the word “child” yet cast as distinguishably male in his need for a bride. To gauge Sarah Delabole’s tone as she mentions espying her great grandson's bride requires recognizing Townsend Warner’s epitaph as a reworking of the hyper-masculine King Arthur myth.

Flipping the myth of the fabled chivalrous king, Townsend Warner mimics courtly romance through her matriarchal heroine Sarah Delabole. Beginning with her name itself, “Sarah Delabole” has the exact same number of syllables and similarly stressed syllables as “Arthur Pendragon.” Delabole is also a toponymic surname, one which a guide to Cornwall, Wales, introduces in relation to King Arthur: “It is close to Camelford, Tintagel, Boscastle and Port Isaac and is thus in the heart of King Arthur Country. The area abounds with castles and battle sites” (“Delabole”). The elevation of the castles in the Welsh town Delabole contributes to an understanding of Townsend Warner’s diction here: the word “espied” indicates that Sarah Delabole sees her future great-granddaughter-in-law from a distance. Further, the word “espied” is an archaic verb Sir Thomas Malory uses over thirty times in the Arthurian text *Le Morte d’Arthur*. In her composition of the last two lines of the poem, Townsend Warner actually borrows from another Arthurian text, the anonymously authored *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Sarah’s “hard-won gear” (19) alludes to the green girdle worn first by Sir Gawain as a sign of failure in his games against his opponent Bertilak and later adopted by the Arthurian knights as a sign of honor among men (Friedman, Osberg 301). Bertilak’s wife, a mythical seductress, first presents this to Sir Gawain as a “love-token” offering him a means of survival in the games against her husband (Friedman, Osberg 301). The adjective “hard-won” refers back to these games² and thus indicates that Sarah herself has undergone trials in her life to receive some token akin to Gawain’s girdle. Sarah’s daughters value only the material possessions she leaves behind, ignoring her “lore,” or ignoring the stories she has to tell about how she won such “hard-

² In Neilson and Webster’s 1917 translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, they use the term “hard-won” to describe Morgan le Fay’s “skill” in the 19th section of Fytte the Fourth (28). At this point towards the close of the poem, Morgan le Fay is revealed to be the magical antagonist who organized the games between Sir Gawain and Bertilak.

won gear,” the gear itself referring to an ambiguously symbolic girdle of sorts her daughter and granddaughter are using as a marital offering to secure the child’s bride.

Sarah’s female family members ignored their matriarch in life, and their son will suffer the ramifications when courting his bride with pieces of his great grandmother’s “hard-won gear,” the histories behind which Sarah takes with her to the grave. The physicality of the “hard-won gear,” initially a heterosexual token of exchange and then a widely recognized homosocial symbol in the King Arthur myth, complicates the understanding of gender in this poem without making Sarah a sexless being or limiting her reproductive capacity. The mention of her daughter, granddaughter, and great-grandson alongside her “hard-won gear” proves Sarah to be capable of mothering as well as capable of more traditionally masculine feats, whatever those may be; maternalism and physical strength are therefore not mutually exclusive. In contrast with the epitaphs of Melissa Mary Thorn and Mary Grove, though, Sarah Delabole’s epitaph is devoid of a husband figure who discredits or disparages her; the suppressive figures in Sarah’s case are her distinctly feminine daughter and granddaughter. These two surviving generations of women greedily gravitate toward the “hard-won gear” as the bride price for Sarah’s great-grandson, Sarah’s feats in life being reduced to their heterosexual valuation. Sarah’s female survivors perpetuate the very gender roles and practices from which the matriarch distances herself. Treating the male child’s future wedding as a commercial exchange, Sarah’s daughter and granddaughter effectively reduce the female marital prospect to a physical object. These two female figures act in accordance with Butler’s idea of paternal law as they extend and reinforce the idea that the cis-female body is a locus of reproductive exchange. By offering the potential bride Sarah’s “hard-won gear,” the daughter and granddaughter will effectively secure the continuation of the bloodline through childbirth, clearly the concern in a poem listing four

generations. Sarah as matriarch, however, is not the focal point of the epitaph; Sarah as victor, winner of “hard-won gear,” collector of “lore” is. In spite of Sarah’s discontinuous and subversive gender performance, however, her daughters cling to the very paternal law that socially sidelines them on the basis of gender for a sense of generational security.

III. Epitaphs of Three Children/Young Adults

Annott Clare's epitaph in *The Espalier* stands in contrast to Sarah Delabole's epitaph as a widowed mother eulogizes her dead daughter, expressing favoritism for her deceased daughter based on their shared femininity despite her having seven living sons. Townsend Warner writes,

A widowed mother reared this stone

To Annott Clare, aged twenty-one.

Seven live sons have I, but she

Was dearer than them all to me. (from "Epitaphs," *The Espalier*, 9-12)

Distinctly unheroic, Annott Clare's mother survives both her husband, a detail Townsend Warner includes as she describes the mother specifically as "widowed," and her twenty-one-year-old daughter (9-10). Characterized in reference to her husband and her child, the grieving widowed mother is a distinctly domestic, family-oriented female figure. Townsend Warner's verbal diction suggests this: the widowed mother specifically "reared" (9) this stone. The verb "reared" takes an ill-fitting object in the word "stone." Townsend Warner specifically chooses the verb "reared" to suggest the maternal. The widowed mother rearing "this stone" calls to mind the image of the widowed mother rearing her daughter Annott Clare to maturity; "Annott Clare, aged twenty-one," herself has just reached maturity in her early twenties. The mother "rears" the stone in her place as an everlasting symbol of her youth and, too, as a freshly placed yet eternal earthly memorial for a daughter passed. Further, the verb itself is "reared... / To Annott Clare" (9-10). The stone literally disrupts the syntax of the poem by interjecting itself between the still strangely worded verbal phrase "reared... / To." The widowed mother places the stone, a symbol of her daughter's death, at the end of the line and in the middle of the sentence to reinforce the fact that Annott Clare has died too soon, right at the end of her maturity—the first

line of her life—and has thus disrupted what would become of her in the future. In the second line of the poem, the mother simply introduces her dead daughter by name and age. This introduction essentially begins Annott Clare's obituary rather than beginning the second stage of her life, the stage into which she would have entered in her early twenties had she survived.

The widowed mother scathingly berates her seven surviving sons in the third and fourth lines to reinforce the mother-daughter bond she and Annott Clare shared. She claims, "Seven live sons have I, but she / Was dearer than them all to me" (11-2). The word "Seven" immediately disrupts the meter as an indication of the several live sons' inadequacy in the mother's mind compared to her sole daughter Annott Clare. Seven, too, is an odd number; with Annott Clare, the mother had an even number of children, eight. The heterosexual couple itself has also been reduced to an odd number through the death of the mother's husband. What was once a productive (and presumably happy) couple with a large family has been reduced in size to simply a widowed mother, distinctly saddened by her daughter's death, and her seven surviving sons whose presence eases neither her husband's nor her daughter's death. A matriarch through death with no female lineage, Annott Clare's mother is therefore a lone, perhaps now lonely, woman. A figure tied to her home and her domestic role as a mother and wife, the mother rears the grave as her last maternal act for Annott Clare, the child "dearer than them all [the seven sons] to me" (12).

Similar to Annott Clare's epitaph in its domestic diction and metrical flair is Ann Monk's epitaph in *Time Importuned*. Written in the voice of "Her grieving parents" (9), Ann Monk's epitaph is distinctly domestic and markedly religious. As with Annott Clare's epitaph, the parents introduce their dead daughter:

Her grieving parents cradled here

Ann Monk, a gracious child and dear.

Lord, let this epitaph suffice:

Early to Bed and Early to Rise. (from “Epitaphs,” *Time Importuned*, 9-13)

Ann Monk is described as “a gracious child and dear” (10) indicating that she has died younger than Annott Clare; however, both are still “dear” to their parents. Ann Monk’s parents also perceive the gravesite as a mirror of the domestic space, evident in the verb “cradled” to describe her being buried. “Cradled,” too, attests to her age. A baby sleeps in a cradle, the verb’s noun form, in the home, but by using the verb form, Townsend Warner reinforces the parents’ grief. The verb “cradled” denotes the parents’ physical protection of the child in their arms, a protection now the responsibility of God.

Invoking the Lord, Ann Monk’s parents inscribe on her headstone the phrase “Early to Bed and Early to Rise” (12), a metaphoric aphorism combining an early earthly death (Early to Bed) with a quick entry into eternal life (Early to Rise). This aphorism has both secular and religious roots. Secularly, the phrase is contentiously credited to Benjamin Franklin who wrote in the 1735 edition of *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy wealthy and wise” (Martin). A literal interpretation of Franklin’s aphorism suggests that if a man goes to sleep early and wakes early, he will go about his day (or, rather, his life) industriously, turn a profit, and gain general insight into the workings of the world—specifically a man’s world. The precursors to Franklin’s phrase, however, are verses from the Book of Proverbs in the Bible, specifically Chapters 6 and 8. Chapter 6 verse 17 reads, “I love them that love me; And those that seek me early shall find me” (*King James Version*, Proverbs); chapter 8 verses 9 through 11 read, “How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty

come as one that travelleth and any want as an armed man” (*King James Version*, Proverbs). The parents of Ann Monk seem to borrow meaning from the Book of Proverbs while adopting the phrasing of the secular. They preface this quote, saying, “Lord, let this epitaph suffice:” (Townsend Warner 11), suggesting both their inability to write something original to convey the emotions they feel regarding the death of their daughter and their own acknowledgment of their earthly inferiority to God. Townsend Warner satirizes the Christian belief in the afterlife and trust in a benevolent God not only in this ambiguously sourced aphorism but also in the inconsistencies in meter and rhyme. Ann Monk’s parents’ use of the aphorism appears more than sufficient as the last line of the poem contains nine syllables rather than eight, yet the off rhyme of “suffice” and “Rise” reveals the more obvious insufficiency. Townsend Warner mocks the parents’ overcompensation for the earthly death of their daughter Ann Monk, a name itself suggesting both feminine and masculine brands of Christian piety in its allusion to Mary’s mother Ann and the ascetic religious men who dedicate their lives to religion, in their invocation of the Lord through domestic metaphor to house and protect their deceased daughter on their behalf in the Christian utopian Heaven.

Unlike the dear daughters Annott Clare and Ann Monk whose parents grieve their losses, the schoolboy Tom Fool is not memorialized kindly by his family in his epitaph. In fact, Townsend Warner writes his epitaph in the anonymous third-person voice to distance him from his family. The girls’ deaths seem unexpected, unwarranted even, as their parents eulogize them, yet this young boy’s epitaph objectively presents the reality of his implicitly warranted suffering in life. Interestingly, the reactions of their survivors and contemporaries are rooted in the idea of the abiding gendered self. The young female figures are remembered kindly for their obedience

and piety, while the young male figure Tom Fool, his name Townsend Warner's clear play on the word "tomfoolery," is remembered for his unruly behavior:

Here lies the body of Tom Fool

Who died, a little boy, at school

Oft did he bleed and oft did weep,

And whimpering, now has fallen asleep. (from "Epitaphs," *Time Importuned*, 13-6).

No one claims Tom Fool; he dies at school totally disconnected from his family. The prepositional phrase "at school" itself is ambiguously situated on the precipice between the epitaph's second and third lines without any punctuation establishing to which line it belongs. In one sense, he "died, a little boy, at school" (14); in another, however, "at school / Oft did he bleed and oft did weep" (14-5). In the latter lending of the prepositional phrase to the content of the third line, Townsend Warner reveals that Tom Fool received corporal punishment often as discipline for his behavior at school. Townsend Warner's liberal use of commas in the second line lends the epitaph poem the pacing of a whipping; the repetition of "oft," however, in the third line suggests that this corporal punishment was ineffective. In addition, this repeated "oft" suggests that his parents failed to reprimand him at home or, more simply, failed to raise him to behave appropriately in school.

Townsend Warner extends the idea of behaving appropriately to the masculine subject to prove that gender norms are equally harmful to men. Associating masculinity with tomfoolery, Townsend Warner presents a young male who has suffered physical repercussions for his social transgressions, not unlike the women who have died from failures to produce children physically and to reproduce femininity abstractly in a social sphere that conflates sex and gender. Although Tom Fool avoids sexualization and oppression on the basis of gender, the content of his epitaph

is heavy with the memories of physical violence enacted and excused by authority figures on account of his disruptive behaviors.

Tom Fool's parents' absence from the epitaph then becomes more pointed as their son dies outside of the home and is not remembered by them at all. "Whimpering," the neglected Tom Fool "now has fallen asleep" (16). The participle "whimpering" indicates not only his fear when faced by death but also his cognizance of the fact that he is dying during a moment which the reader can conclude Tom Fool spent at school in the company of a disgruntled disciplinarian whipping him in anger. Tom Fool's production of tears, perhaps for sympathy and perhaps simply due to the pain he feels as he bleeds from the disciplinary actions taken by the school, shifts to the production of whimpers through the instillation of fear by a force much bigger than him, just "a little boy" (14), as his behaviors prove fatal. Townsend Warner's choice of the domestic euphemism "has fallen asleep" (16) to describe the death quiets and subdues Tom Fool in an eternal bed. Sleep, therefore, offers not only Tom Fool but also the school's faculty and students' peace. Judging by the epitaph's general disconnectedness from the home and the family, the young Tom Fool finally receives an embrace, the metaphoric embrace of death, as the ultimate punishment for his actions.

IV. Epitaphs of One Couple and Two Single People

In contrast to the previously mentioned epitaph poems satirizing unsatisfied or absent spouses and their deceased children, Townsend Warner reunites husband and wife, one of whom died thirty years before the other, in one *Espalier* epitaph to further demonstrate the way death quiets people (as it does with Tom Fool) and, as a result, suppresses marital quarrels:

After long thirty years re-met

I, William Clarke, and I, Jeanette

His wife, lie side by side once more;

But quieter than we lay before. (from "Epitaphs," *The Espalier*, 5-8)

Townsend Warner introduces the joint speakers of the poem in the first person through two "I"s: "I, William Clarke, and I, Jeanette / His wife" (6-7). The two "lie side by side once more" (7) literally in the second line of the quatrain, literally (within the poem's imagined graveyard) in their shared grave under this consolidated epitaph, and figuratively in an imagined bed in the domestically aligned afterlife. The two voices quip, "But quieter than we lay before" (8), at the close of the poem, alluding to their loudness in life, a loudness that could either refer to their noisy sex or to their marital disagreements. The poem's metrical hiccups point to the latter.

The quatrain opens with a trochee rather than an iamb, the very first syllable of the poem being stressed as such: "Af⁷/ter" (6). Townsend Warner does not correct the meter immediately, however, as she follows the trochee with a spondee, both the word "long" and the first syllable of "thirty" stressed. The trochee and the spondee together cast a heaviness over the poem which emerges explicitly in the perfectly iambic power struggle between the spouses in the epitaph's second line: "I, William Clarke, and I, Jeanette" (7). The first "I" which refers to the husband is unstressed, whereas the second "I" which refers to the wife is stressed. In order to rectify the

imbalance of power in the stressed syllables, Townsend Warner frames Jeanette as “His wife” (8), referring back to William for Jeanette’s agency in the poem, thus rendering the husband’s voice a more dominant force. Even in their union at the end of the poem, in order to fit into iambs “But quieter than” (8) must be metrically divided as such: “But quie’/ter than’.” The stressed “quie” syllable, however, is actually two syllables; Townsend Warner forces the diphthong, the union of two “side by side” vowels, to maintain the quatrain’s iambic tetrameter. The verbal strain this iamb places in the poem mirrors the marital strain verbal altercations placed on the Clarkes’ marriage. The poem does fall into perfect meter despite awkwardness, and the Clarkes do remain married despite verbal disagreements. In this re-meeting in the grave “after long thirty years” (5), death, an involuntary silencing, forces them to lie quieter. The spouses each claiming himself and herself in their respective “I” introductions separated by commas in line six have merged into a “we” only in death. Interestingly, the word “we” is unstressed. The grave forces them together in an eternal bed and their deaths force them to be quiet, thus mending an earthly marriage that was strained above ground.

Townsend Warner also writes the epitaphs of two uncoupled adults, one male and one female, in their own voices in *Time Importuned* to highlight the prescribed differences in behavior between the genders when single. First, she presents an “unwedded wandering dame,” deliberately unnamed in the epitaph as a reflection of her freedom in being “unwedded” and “wandering”:

I, an unwedded wandering dame

For quiet into the country came.

Here, hailed it; but did not foretell

I’d stay so long and rest so well. (from “Epitaphs,” *Time Importuned*, 1-4)

The title “dame” funnily suggests the woman’s old age and social status through an allusion to the English classification of heroic femininity despite her being a wanderer without claims to any property. The speaker shares a detail relating specifically to her wandering, claiming, “I... / For quiet into the country came” (1-2). Rather than seeking a husband, she seeks an escape from the noisiness of city life; however, Townsend Warner’s diction suggests that the woman herself brings the noise, writing “Here, hailed it; but did not foretell” (3). The verb “hailed” denotes an exclamation, here, an ironic exclamation and invocation of the quiet recalled in the verb’s object “it.” Further, the verb “foretell,” while literally meaning to predict, contains the word “tell,” thus suggesting the speaker’s verbal assertion despite the verb functioning within the poem in the negative.

Townsend Warner may craft the single woman in a way that makes her appear liberated from the heterosexual domestic site, but she is careful to maintain elements of socialized femininity despite her status as single and childless. Butler, concerned with Foucault’s theories of repressive power, urges a thorough examination of liberation from the confines of gender:

As Foucault makes clear, the culturally contradictory enterprise of the mechanism of repression is prohibitive and generative at once and makes the problematic of “liberation” especially acute. The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation. (119)

While this woman opens the second set of epitaphs, she remains unnamed, the first mark of problematic liberation for the single woman. This choice of anonymity is deliberate on the part of Townsend Warner, her speaker’s namelessness suggesting a lack of social importance despite the seemingly powerful assertion of self in the opening pronoun “I.” The speaker’s first

descriptor is that she is “unwedded” as she immediately characterizes herself through the very construct of marriage that she has avoided in life. She is “freed from the shackles of paternal law” by not marrying (and presumably not giving birth), but this freedom is “yet another incarnation of that law,” evident in the presence of the word “wedded,” the distinct reminder of marriage, in the word “unwedded.” Subversive though she may seem as a single woman, the unwedded wandering dame simply projects herself onto the epitaph in contrast to married domestic women in the “wedded/unwedded” binary. Her radicalism stems from her relationship status, perhaps passively since Townsend Warner chooses the adjective “unwedded” over the simpler “unwed.”

Not quite the agent she seems, this unnamed single woman nevertheless gains respite in the ground. Like the young schoolboy Tom Fool and the squabbling married Clarkes, death silences the single woman, allowing her to “rest so well” in the country. She herself seems pleasantly surprised by her death, the tone veering towards relaxed. No longer does she wander as death situates her firmly in the ground, and in a more positive reflection, no longer does her status as a single woman leave her susceptible to potential mockery or criticism. Dead in the country, she no longer hears the literal noise of the city or the figurative noise rooted in the sociopolitical confines of marriage and the female expectation of being a wife and mother in English society.

On the other hand, Townsend Warner writes the epitaph of Richard Kent who brags about his sexual exploits as a single man:

I, Richard Kent, beneath these stones
Sheltered my old and trembling bones;
But my best manhood, quick and brave,

Lies buries [*sic*: buried] in another grave. (from “Epitaphs,” *Time Importuned*, 5-8).

She first characterizes Richard as an old man: “I, Richard Kent, beneath these stones / Sheltered my old and trembling bones” (5-6). Literally, Richard’s “old and trembling bones” are buried “beneath these stones” as he dies old and single, the grave being a posthumous domestic site that “shelters” him like a home. Richard Kent makes explicit his sexuality, though, in the last two lines: “But my best manhood, quick and brave, / Lies buries [*sic*: buried]³ in another grave” (7-8). “My best manhood” is a euphemism for Richard’s penis, described as “quick and brave” (7) in contrast to his bones, (literal but also phallic, which he calls “old and trembling” (5). He boasts of the “quick”ness of his manhood, his penis, despite his age; in the same way, he boasts of the “brave”ry of the penis, despite his “trembling,” a word suggesting fear but also orgasm, bones. “Brave,” too, suggests Richard Kent’s numerous sexual conquests, these conquests veering towards heroic when performed by a single man. The manhood “lies burie[d] in another grave” (8), “grave” here being a euphemism for the vagina. Even in his own bodily burial, his penis remains “burie[d]” (the word functioning as a verbal metaphor for sexual penetration) in a vagina, a comic allusion to Richard Kent’s sexual prowess. Townsend Warner even implies his sexuality in the introduction. The name “Richard” can be shortened to the nickname “Dick,” a slang term for the penis; the topographic surname “Kent” sounds vaguely like “cunt,” a vulgar slang term alluding to the vagina. Buried “beneath these stones,” “stones” here oddly cased in the plural despite the epitaph suggesting that only one headstone marks his grave, Richard Kent “shelter[s]” his “old and trembling bones” beneath two female breasts. While the “unwedded wandering dame” escapes the noise and rests, Richard Kent continues to make noise even in

³ Original copies of *Time Importuned* are difficult to access. This poem is reprinted on page 408 of *Education Manual 131: Modern American and British Poetry in Two Volumes, Volume 2* prepared for the United States Armed Forces Institute in 1942. The correct line reads, “Lies buried in another grave.”

death through his sexually charged, boastfully toned epitaph. Townsend Warner's domestic and sexual imagery metaphorically transforms the female body into a home for the male sexual organ. Richard Kent, single, slips in and out of literal domestic spaces until his burial; his manhood, however, immortalized through his sexual conquests, still resides elsewhere, in another grave with another person, whichever of his multiple partners that may be.

Between the single characters, there appears to be an indirect line of communication. Townsend Warner positions their epitaphs in direct succession, the unwedded dame's appearing first and Richard Kent's following. In doing this, Townsend Warner presents a feminine figure defined by her age, relationship status, and class, the markers of eligibility for a heterosexual partnering, alongside a masculine figure defined by his sexual exploits. Townsend Warner hints at the double standard in social mores here and complicates liberation, not quite releasing her female character from heterosexually rooted gender oppression simply because she is uncoupled. Butler argues that subversion on the basis of gender must happen within the confines of paternal law to "avoid the emancipation of the oppressor in the name of the oppressed" (119). In other words, had Townsend Warner emancipated her unwedded wandering dame in her epitaph, that emancipation would still be limited within a male-dominated, heterosexual system, the "emancipated" female subject veering towards the masculine as the only viable alternative social expression of gender. Butler herself questions if the oppressed female body will ever truly be liberated from the rigid prescriptions of gender:

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to

its “natural” past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities. (119)

Townsend Warner’s memorialized single subjects remain culturally constructed as caricatures of the uncoupled feminine and masculine. While Townsend Warner approaches subversion as the woman rests easily and the man trembles in death, the law has not quite turned against itself or spawned any unexpected permutations. These contrasting epitaphs of uncoupled people become yet another exhibit of the oppressive gender binary as it exists under paternal law. While neither figure assumes a spousal or parental role, the roles they assume as single people are entirely limited, informed, and inscribed by their respective genders.

V. Conclusion

In both of her sets of “Epitaphs,” Sylvia Townsend Warner comments on domestic gender roles through the heterosexual, domestic gravesite, highlighting the idiosyncrasies underscoring marital and parental relationships and laughing at these highly gendered English social norms in a variety of voices. Townsend Warner herself performs gender in each epitaph as she assumes the voice of each respective buried subject or next of kin. While gender, according to Judith Butler, is a primarily social phenomenon “impossible to embody,” there are deeply physical implications and repercussions associated with the enactment of gender that Townsend Warner’s epitaphs dissect.

Writing in the poetic epitaph genre, Townsend Warner explores the concept of grounding a body with words. In order to memorialize a deceased subject, Townsend Warner must situate that subject back into society; no memorial can be asocial. The subject, therefore, is always a social (or socialized) being and therefore reflects the social constraints and prescriptions of his or her time. Focusing heavily on the reproduction of heterosexual domestic gender roles, norms, and expectations in her epitaph poetry, Townsend Warner mocks rather unpoetic English society. These microcosmic iterations of gender essentialism Townsend Warner “inscribes” on the gravestones as she writes these epitaphs contribute to the larger reproduction of the heterosexual domestic environment in the shared public space of the graveyard while simultaneously questioning the stability of gender itself. Townsend Warner is certainly exploring the idea of gender through the lens of death and burial, though gender is all but dead. Like Butler, Townsend Warner adopts a “phantasmatic” view of gender, projecting her memorialized characters back into their earthly bodies to reveal domestic tensions and contemporary struggles on the basis of gender in these brief, concise quatrains.

In the epitaphs of the buried women Melissa Mary Thorn and Mary Grove, the female figures are reduced to their reproductive abilities and their bodies are criticized by their husbands for not being physically fit to carry children to term. Sarah Delabole in her first-person authored epitaph, on the other hand, is less expository and more critical of her surviving family members who will use her physical possessions to acquire a bride for her great grandson, thus ensuring the continuation of the family line through the masculine child but ignoring its distinctly matriarchal history. Gender becomes essentialized in a more behavioral way in the epitaphs of the younger dead: Annot Clare, Ann Monk, and Tom Fool. The two female subjects, aligned with goodness and benevolence, are beloved by their respective families who mourn their losses deeply. These two young women stand in stark contrast with the unclaimed young boy Tom Fool whose behavior at school causes bodily harm to himself and others. The female subjects' subservience and assimilation to domestic roles earn them the sympathy of their parents, and Tom Fool's public disturbance prompts his abandonment by his family, suffering ostracization from both the public academic sphere and the private domestic unit. Even in the epitaphs of the unwedded wandering dame and Richard Kent, Townsend Warner employs the same set of gendered spatial politics as she does in the combined epitaph of the married couple. Townsend Warner's fictive English subjects are immortalized both in and through their performances of gender, always actualizing or deliberately failing to actualize the abiding gendered self within the publicized domestic space.

From the epitaphs of Melissa Mary Thorn to Richard Kent, Townsend Warner makes clear her frustration with the rigidly gendered, distinctly heteronormative English society in which she lives. Using the headstone, a marker of death, as the fictive medium for her poems, Townsend Warner suffocates the dead doubly with the very social constructions of gender that

limited their bodies in life. Whether eulogizing disgruntled husbands or inattentive wives, dear daughters or devilish sons, wandering spinsters or promiscuous bachelors, Townsend Warner irreverently attacks the domestic roles and expectations underlying English society in her epitaph poetry.

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