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Social Intercession in Early Modern Gloucestershire

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The study of commemoration in the 16th and 17th centuries is characterised by dichotomies. It has long been recognized that the reforms of the 16th century did not effect a straightforward translation of religious beliefs among the population of England. However, memorials erected before the 1530s are consistently described in terms of their active role as intercessory media, whereas post-Reformation monuments are regarded as passive expressions of the wealth and standing of the deceased and their family. In the case of early modern Gloucestershire, it can be argued that the Reformations intensified an existing trend towards the use of the parish space for ideological display. Liberated from its sacral duties, the principal role of the memorial became that of a social intercessor for the living. The depiction of the deceased in life was matched by an increased social activation of the monument, as heraldry, inscribed lineage and the depiction of family members combined to emphasize the perpetual dominance of a particular lineage over the rest of the community.

Keywords: commemoration, medieval, reformation, early modern, ideology, display

Introduction

The mid 16th century in England was undoubtedly a time of great change within the religious and social life of England. Through the course of the Reformation, Protestant secular and sacred authorities attempted to sweep away an entire worldview, along with its complex sacramental practices and vivid material culture. The extent to which these reforms were acknowledged and acted upon varied across the country. Regionally based historical and archaeological studies have identified the extent of this variability. Elijenholm-Nichols' (1989) research into the Cratfield parish records demonstrates the eager conformity of the East Anglian parish, while Duffy's (2001) study of Morebath in Somerset shows how local piety could militate itself against the wishes of the higher authorities. Though such studies might acknowledge some continuity in religious thought within the minds of individuals, their decision to fixate upon devotional aspects of commemoration over other social and economic functions establishes the 16th century as a disjuncture wherein such attitudes were necessarily internalised or labelled radical. The expressed purpose of medieval commemorative media had been to collect prayers for the soul of the deceased in order to speed them through Purgatory. The denunciation of this has led some studies to suggest that reform anaesthetized commemoration, changing it from an active conduit between the living and the dead, to a passive reflection of the particular wealth and power of an individual and their family. However, the use of images of piety in medieval commemoration was never purely devotional.

The pairing of clasped hands and intercessory saints with colourful heraldic displays allied spirituality with wealth and illustrious ancestry. The ability to publicly display piety was socially restricted and as such the solidification of devotion in this manner articulated a link between worldly wealth and divine sanction. The latter legitimated the continued dominance of a particular family within the community. Despite requisite iconographical change, the essential relationship between public displays of piety and the legitimisation of social status continued unabated through the 16th century and into the 17th century. In recent years the regional studies of scholars such as Saul (2001), Finch (1991, 2000) and Graves (2000) have demonstrated how effective a particularised archaeological approach to the study of memorials can be in reconstructing the relationship between display and social dominance. Established historical and art historical methodologies have taken a much broader view of its material culture, incorporating monuments from across the country in order the gain an impression of commemorative trends at a particular point in time. This approach, favoured by Llewellyn and Houlbrooke amongst others, favours disjuncture and periodicity over continuity. The presence of a certain type of image labels a memorial as either traditional or reformed, allying it to a particular religious climate rather than ongoing strategies of status negotiation amongst the affluent. The following will examine the manipulation of

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piety in service of social status as an ongoing strategy through the intramural monuments of Gloucestershire, with particular emphasis upon how little the mindset of the wealthy commissioners altered in spite of the religious dislocations of the 1500s.

Theorising the Study of Ideological Display

The way in which archaeologists have chosen to define the relationship between material culture and social power has been influenced by their perception of the word 'ideology'. This concept has been subject to dramatic fluctuations in meaning contingent on its application. Such variability is not problematic in itself, but does necessitate that the term be redefined by each researcher seeking to employ it within their work. The multiplicity of circumstances in which concepts of ideology might be applicable requires occasional modification of its meaning. The *Oxford Dictionary* definition of the term is dry and rather too broad to be used without some clarification in order to make it relevant to the context in question. The concept of 'a system of ideas at the basis of an economic or political theory' is applicable to this study. However, this description is tainted by the popular perception of ideology as an autocratic device; a set of ideas filtered through material culture as part of an exercise in mass suggestion. Ideology is certainly a tool of power. However, the concept is not as socially restricted as the standard definition may imply, nor does it necessarily have to be exercised on such a grand scale. Ideology relates the aims and aspirations of certain individuals or groups, projected forcefully onto an audience with the intention of convincing them of its conceptual validity. Imagery can be a vital tool in this process, portraying the wishes of its progenitors through a palatable and unobjectionable medium.

The interpretations placed upon imagery were rarely as singular as the authors might wish, though this may not always be apparent to the researcher. Recipients may see through the façade and so place their own interpretations upon an artefact based upon their reaction to the perceived motives of the creators, perhaps responding with some material defence of their own position. Symbols do not merely represent or disguise power relations, but may actually constitute them. They can be used to convey the author's reading of his social and economic role in society to those regarding the image. Whatever the intentions of the producer, once an image has been produced and displayed it becomes subject to multiple acts of consumption. A myriad interpretations are placed upon it based upon the particular context in which the image is displayed and the experiences of the interpreter. These readings will agree or conflict, depending upon shared and contrasting past experiences and current worldviews. Opinions are shared and refuted, binding groups together or splitting them up. As such, the original ideologically loaded production of the author becomes embroiled in the negotiation of a range of disparate identities, which may be of little consequence to them or their reasons for producing the image. Inevitably, these acts of negotiation will locate certain individuals and groups above others. As an abstract process, this negotiation of meaning could easily be applied to any cultural production, whether as openly prestigious as the Taj Mahal or the tomb of the Black Prince or as mundane as a stylus or cola can. How readers identify with such cultural productions and their authors is determined by their social and economic situation, which brings preconceptions to the process of interpretation. As people experience that material culture, they also renegotiate their place within the material and social world as a result of the encounter. Perceptions of their surroundings, of the author and other readers might be changed by the experience.

It is not sufficient to state that the use of objects in the negotiation of identities is common to all societies, particularly when dealing specifically with the ideological manipulation of imagery in order to advance the position of one individual or group over another. Ideological negotiation is frequently built upon ideas of prestige. The correlation of prestige with certain objects over others, and the resultant wishes of certain groups to associate with them, will inevitably link to historical precedents within the society in question and so be bound to its specific social and economic structure. Hodder (1991) has drawn attention to three characteristics of ideology highlighted by Giddens (1984):

- The representation of sectional interests as universal.
- The denial or transmutation of contradictions.
- The naturalisation or reification of the present.

All are valid characteristics that might seemingly be applied to any instance of ideological deployment. However, in order to state with confidence that a specific group or individual was using material culture ideologically, not to mention whom this deployment was aimed at and how it was intended to function, it is necessary to know

why that particular format was favoured over any other. This requires a degree of reciprocity between theory and practice rather than the indiscreet application of a predefined model. There has been little consideration of why certain forms of material culture might be regarded as prestigious within certain contexts. The abstract association of ideology, display and prestige must not take precedence over particular incidences of ideological manipulation. It is vital to maintain interplay between the model, the material and its generative context in order to ensure that the theory augments the interpretation of the data rather than the reverse.

Figure 1: Images surviving on the 15th century tomb of John Blaket at Icomb, Glos.

Ideology, Form and Function in Medieval Gloucestershire

Prior to the 16th century, the intercessory images of piety that have survived on Sir John Blaket's monument at Icomb might have suggested that the knight was favoured by the company of Heaven, reflecting favourably upon his surviving family in the eyes of the community (Figure 1). From the 1530s, the meaning of such images had been renegotiated by the Crown and its emissaries. They were remade as marks of treason and heresy and their destruction made space for the symbols of royal dominance over religion that would perpetuate the insular and centralised authority of the King. Although the events of the Reformation were influential, they did not exert a deterministic influence upon people's interpretation of religious imagery. As they were discarded, fallen images of the Reformation bound opposition to reform, empowering men such as Robert Aske at the head of the Pilgrimage of Grace who marched under the banner of the Five Wounds of Christ. Meaning was not intrinsic to the image or to those choosing to display it; it was borne in the instance of interaction between the two. The sense of empowerment experienced was as unique and impermanent as each encounter, as each pair of eyes read the image with reference to their own social and economic circumstances.

Images such as the Crucifixion attained new meanings depending upon when they were observed and who was displaying them. The capacity of devotional imagery to display and endow power is constant throughout late medieval and early modern England. Its usefulness in this capacity was recognised by the secular elite, whose images and marks of occupations of office feature in church interiors both before and after the Reformation. Cannon (1989) has remarked that historical change is the context in which ideological and social meaning are established, but the ideological or social interpretation of variation in mortuary behaviour requires that one or both of these meanings remains constant. Within the context of medieval and early modern commemoration in Gloucestershire, that constant was provided by the ideological potential of piety as a vehicle for the expression and advancement of personal and familial status.

Hodder (1991) has asserted that two types of ideological control might be articulated through material culture; that which references the conscious world of ritual and the unconscious norms of everyday life. The line between these two forms is obviously

somewhat fluid. Some forms of material culture may be active within both arenas. Tyson (1999) has noted the possible use of 14th century Northern European glass goblets within both domestic contexts and liturgical celebration. In broad terms however the manipulation of forms of pious expression within the communal religious space of the medieval parish seems to belong within the former category. This study examined 60 monuments surviving from c.1350-1539 in Gloucestershire, all erected within the context of the late medieval doctrine of Purgatory and the resultant desire to elicit prayers from the congregation. However, alongside the pious meditation implied by clasped hands and carved saints was an apparent antagonism with worldly wealth, explicit in the use of expensive materials, the depiction of arms and symbols of office. In doctrinal terms, this was certainly problematic. Caxton's 15th century print *A Treatise Speakynge of the Arte and Crafte to Knowe Well to Dye* lists a preoccupation with worldly things as one of the deathbed temptations that might send the dying to Hell. Beyond the idealism of the Ars Moriendi, however, the combining of symbols of piety with those of worldly prestige could advance and sanction the position of an individual and their kin. There was an ongoing tension within the late medieval church space between its professed function as an expression of communal history and the collective interests of the parish, and the increasing visibility of a select number of affluent individuals whose arms proliferated within the fabric of the building and the liturgy of the parish. The medieval church was dependant upon lay donations and benefactions in order to maintain its rich and elaborate liturgical practices. Individual contribution was integral to the maintenance of the communal whole. However, within such a system individual practices would inevitably emerge out of the collective by virtue of wealth and privilege.

Figure 2: A monument to Thomas Machen and wife c.1614 at Gloucester Cathedral.

Rubin (1991) has described the Mass as a catalyst that created social fusion amongst its participants through shared activities such as the reception of the host, the kissing of the pax etc. However, interwoven with these homogenising spiritual activities were the material marks of individual secular empowerment. The names and heraldic insignia of donors decorated the altar cloth, the chalice and even the ministering Clergy. The patronage made material by these donations accepted by the Church and the patron as a means of bringing the identity of the latter and their kin into close proximity with the Host and the Elect, thereby securing intercession for their souls. However, these donations were at once a submission to the power of the divine and an attempt to usurp some of that power in order to advance the prosaic and otherwise fleeting power of a wealthy lineage. Giles (2000) has found evidence of this in the heavily restored wall

paintings at Pickering in Yorkshire, which features a rendition of the Coronation of the Virgin observed by the local elite side by side with the Company of Heaven. Working the names of donors into the liturgy rendered their identity timeless, rendering their families integral to the perpetuation of local religious life and giving divine sanction to their continuing dominance over the secular community.

Rupture and Reform

The liturgically swathed presence of secular wealth within the medieval church is predominantly lost to modern research as a consequence of degradation and destruction in the intervening years. Some examples of benefactions recorded in lists do survive and provide a glimpse into secular presence in sacred space, such as those compiled by Haddon and Scrope for All Saints in Bristol (1469). In the wake of the extinction of the lavish Catholic liturgy from the parish church, monumental commemoration became increasingly elaborate. Monuments became bigger, brighter and noticeably more orientated towards the worldly achievements of the deceased and the perpetual strength of their line. The monuments of Thomas Machen (d.1616) and John and Anne Bower (d.1615) feature lines of monumental children at prayer, simultaneously demonstrating the ongoing piety and fruitfulness of their lines (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 3: A monument to John and Anne Bower c.1615 at Gloucester Cathedral.

In prosaic terms the presence of vital effigies and worldly images of piety were a function of restrictions placed upon the public exhibition of images following the reforms of the mid 16th century. Inert, worldly images filled the spaces formerly occupied by saints both on and around the monuments, covering the swaths of wall space formerly occupied by devotional paintings. However, as Llewellyn (2000) has pointed out, the effigies were principally intended to display the continuing dominance and prosperity of a family line and so were not erected solely to fill an iconographic void following reform. Monumental family members and loud coats of arms were positioned where mediating images and requests for prayer might formerly have been located, placing the perpetuation of individual memory within the actions of kin rather than a celestial power. An Elizabethan monument to Thomas Throkmarton at Tortworth features a number of coats of arms, while a later Throkmarton memorial dating to c.1607 is surmounted by a splay of heraldry which would have been visible from anywhere in the nave (Figures 4 and 5). Contemporary monuments frequently depict effigies holding books and kneeling at prayer desks, emphasising the fact that salvation was a function of mortal piety. Solidifying individual

manifestations of piety within the public space forged a link between the possession of wealth and knowledge of the word of God. This endowed affluent familial piety with a permanence, which those of lesser means could not afford to express, giving sanction to their continuing secular dominance through an alleged relationship between affluence and divine sanction.

Cannon has implied that the elaboration and diversification of material expression in death occurs at points of social disruption, wherein an ambiguity of social status is sufficient to cause a sequence of expressive elaboration (1989). The reforms of the 16th century certainly qualify as social disruption and they were indeed followed by acts of monumental elaboration. However, the reasoning behind the proliferation of commemorative types may not have been directly connected to the uncertainties of the wealthy with regard to their social status. The demise of an important individual within a hierarchical society will always be a disruptive event. It brings the frail and contradictive nature of mortal status into sharp focus, highlighting the fact that all individuals will eventually be homogenised by a shared fate. In a number of societies, including late medieval and early modern England, the death of a king was followed by his replacement with a funerary effigy that was displayed in his stead. Metcalf and Huntington (1991) have asserted that the death of a king undermines an integrative symbol of political stability. The king's person is a symbol of the strength of the political order, a problematic concept when he begins to rot (Metcalf and Huntingdon 1991). However, an understanding of the historical context of commemoration at this point in time demonstrates the dangers of such cross-cultural generalisations.

Figure 4: Thomas Throkmarton's memorial at Tortworth c.1607.

At a time when there was so much ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of the Second Commandment the most sensible course of action for any individual wishing to perpetuate their memory along with the status of their family would surely have been not to raise an image at all, perhaps erecting a text based stone or brass memorial instead. Indeed, only two monuments were recorded in the sample between 1549 and 1570, the earlier of which was a rare Catholic Marian brass. Thomas Throkmarton's memorial, erected in the 1560s, featured no figurative imagery and thus perhaps displays some lingering anxiety in connection with the foregoing political situation. For the practice of monumental commemoration to restart, and even intensify over the next few decades, there must have been some overriding advantage to those concerned which veiled the threat of

iconoclastic attack. The removal of controversial imagery left a physical void that afforded new opportunities for the expression of social status within the church. More important than the physical space, however, was the conceptual emptiness left by the demise of the intercessors. There was no longer any arbitration between humanity and its fate. As a result, the pious iconography of the late 16th and 17th century memorial focuses upon its worldly manifestations; books, prayer desks and kneeling figures. The figures seem in control of their fate, or perhaps even in possession of it, as suggested by the bibles which many hold.

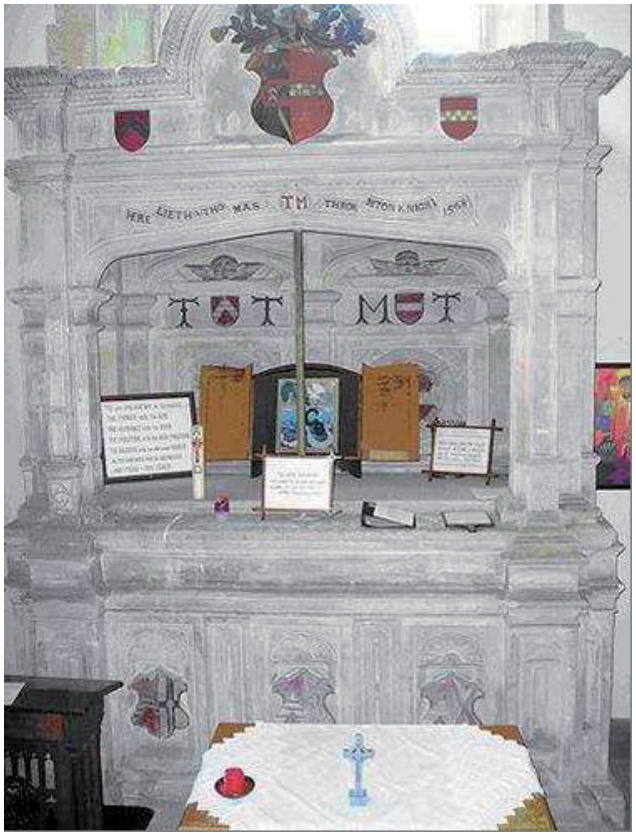

Figure 5: Thomas Throkmarton's memorial at Tortworth c.1568.

Protestant faith in all forms emphasised personal revelation through the word of God. However, the ownership of books was also a mark of education and privilege. The depiction of figures carrying books marked them out as simultaneously devout, wealthy and educated. The deceased, and by implication their kin, both owned and controlled their spiritual destiny. The physical and conceptual removal of the Purgatory and intercession led to an increased concentration upon worldly affirmations of piety within the qualitative schema of the funerary monument. Images of piety were combined with those of lineal descent in order to imply a perpetual link between the two. Prior to the Reformation, wealthy patrons had used the concept of intercession as a means to keep their memory alive in the church, not simply to secure prayers for their souls, but also to ensure that their piety would maintain the status of their surviving kin. The ideological utility of piety as a tool in the perpetuation of earthly prominence was not weakened by the removal of this filter. By contrast, families such as the Throkmartons took the opportunity to construct lavish monuments that did not show deference to any higher power. The eyes of the praying effigies were fixated upon the world and the piety that they displayed was a possession bound in a book.

Conclusion

The stated purpose of the medieval brass and effigy was to solicit prayers from parishioners. Together with the provision of masses, lights and liturgical benefactions they acted in a quantitative manner to speed the passage of the soul through Purgatory. However, such artefacts not only regulated relations between

the living and the dead, but also amongst the vital community of the parish. Coats of arms and the names of benefactors were ubiquitous throughout the parish space. Monuments referenced living members of the congregation, exhibiting the piety of their ancestors, through affluent exhibitions of power. Piety was ideologically manipulated in the justification of dominance and the perpetuation of pre-existing power structures. Commemoration was a natural media for these acts of display, since the rupturing effects of the death of a prominent individual might threaten the continuing prosperity of a particular family. Death needed to be acculturated and pacified so that its effects might be hidden from those who might use it as an excuse to challenge the extant social order. The presence of such acts of display within the parish space rather than in private spaces such as the home is of importance since it defines the intended audience of these displays as the local community, all of whom would have gathered there.

It is unlikely that the proliferation of monumental types that occurred in the early 17th century was due the increased anxieties of the affluent following the religious traumas of the past 50 years. By contrast, these monuments represent an intensification of an existing trend towards the manipulation of piety within the parish space for the purposes of ideological display. The removal of images of sanctity combined with the reformed emphasis upon worldly piety created new opportunities to state personal merit. Clasped hands, books and the prayer desks linked the possession and understanding of the Word of God to a select number of individuals who were able to publicly state it. Devotion serviced the needs of the affluent, rather than serving a medium through which acts of patronage were filtered and legitimated. These monuments were intended to intercede on behalf of the wealthy, located certain families directly below God and above the masses within the structure of parish life. By the early 17th century, it is unlikely that many people who encountered these monuments would remember the highly coloured saints these monuments had replaced. Even without this point of reference it is probable that attitudes to these displays were deeply divided, ranging from awe, though indifference, resentment and jealousy. Patronage had been a feature of the church for hundreds of years. However, monuments such as those of the Bowers and Throkmartons were bigger, brasher and more self-important than anything that had previously been created. They explicitly stated the fact that reformed piety was piety possessed, rather than piety professed. This may have rendered the confident twinning devotion and affluence more obvious and so less acceptable to the audience. Their excess was short-lived, with few effigies post-dating the Civil War in Gloucestershire. They were replaced by smaller commemorative brasses and stones on the walls and by ledger stones set into the floors underfoot, perhaps implying a recognition by either the audience or the authors that without the guise of the liturgy, less was more.

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