

Katherine Philips and “Churching”

After the May 2, 1655, death of Katherine Philips’s infant son, born on April 23 that same year, she wrote two poems: “On the death of my first and dearest childe, Hector Philipps” and “Epitaph. On Hector Phillips. at St. Sith’s Church,” the latter of which is inscribed on a public monument. References within each poem suggest that a religious rite known as “churching” is relevant to an understanding of the poem.

This ritual, performed approximately one month after childbirth, celebrated the return of the mother to the life of the community. The roots of this medieval ritual lay in Judaism (Maltby 63): the twelfth chapter of Leviticus dictates a ceremonial purification of the mother forty days after the birth of a male infant; the period is longer for a female infant. After the Reformation, the ceremony was retained in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*, but was frequently criticized by Puritans and other more radical Protestants. By the seventeenth century, in response to these objections, the rite had been reformulated and renamed “The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, Commonly Called the Churching of Women.” Rather than ritually purifying women, the rite now called on women to thank God for deliverance “from the great pain and peril of childbirth” (*BCP* 314-15). The ceremony was banned in 1645, along with the rest of the *BCP*, until the Restoration in 1666 (McPherson 132).

Thus in the year that Hector Philips died, his mother could not legally take part in the ceremony of churching; however, abolishing it could not erase the community’s memory of the rite, which had enjoyed general popularity among women (Wilson 88-89). Johnson notes that after “the isolation women endured in childbed,” churching assumed “the secularity of something akin to a coming-out celebration” (77). That it was the sole woman-centered liturgy could only have added to its appeal. In the seventeenth-century London suburb studied by

Boulton, “the majority of women” underwent the churching ceremony (278). According to Hess, even Puritans “practiced modified forms of churching rituals devoid of the purification rites” (53). Philips was raised a Puritan and married a Parliamentarian but became a Royalist; she may have become a moderate Protestant as well. Whatever her religious beliefs at the time of her son’s birth, there is no reason to believe that she would have omitted the ceremony if it had not been banned.

Philips’s son lived only nine days. Yet in “On the death” Philips writes that “in forty days he dropped away,” and in “Epitaph,” she gives the period as “less than six weeks.” Although technically correct, both lines suggest a period somewhat longer than nine days. Moreover, while “in forty days” parallels the “twice forty months in wedlock” she had waited for the baby according to the first poem, the same cannot be said of “in less than six weeks” and the “seven years childless marriage” (line 5) that preceded Hector’s brief life according to “Epitaph.” Attempting to explain why in “On the death” Philips has her baby live forty days rather than nine, Hageman notes that forty is “associated in Christian numerology with periods of privation and trial,” periods such as the Flood and Christ’s temptation in the wilderness (568; cf. Meyer). However, since neither of these events has much to do with infants, the phrases “forty days” and “less than six weeks” seem much more likely to refer to the forty-day period prescribed by Leviticus and generally practiced in churching.

In an article about two other women of the period who wrote from their experiences as mothers (Alice Thornton and Elizabeth Cavendish Egerton), McPherson argues that “after 1645 . . . women’s writing privately utilized the language of churching” (132). While not as strongly linked to the liturgy as the writings of Thornton and Egerton, Philips’ poems about her infant son suggest that thinking about churching may have helped her articulate her loss. If so, part of her

grief derived from the knowledge that at the point when women of the past were publicly celebrating, and her contemporaries were more quietly celebrating their survival of childbirth, little Hector had already been buried.

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