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## Re-assessing the *ars moriendi*: good and bad deaths in early modern England

The mediaeval *ars moriendi*, or art of dying well, was reformulated in Elizabethan and Stuart England to reflect new Protestant doctrine, and disseminated through prescriptive and descriptive accounts of exemplary deaths that served to edify the dying, their families, and other godly readers. The preacher Robert Hill insisted in 1610 that it was “the art of all arts, and science of all sciences, to learn to die”.<sup>1</sup> The “good death” has been explored in depth by several scholars, most notably Ralph Houlbrooke, with other valuable contributions by Clare Gittings, Peter Marshall, and David Cressy, drawing mainly on accounts by ministers and the families of the godly.<sup>2</sup> This essay employs a different lens, using different source material. Looking beyond the ranks of the godly, it asks on what basis other contemporaries—the great majority— might judge a death “good” or “bad”. What criteria did they apply to assess the last days of their kin, friends, acquaintances, or neighbours?

This article explores the issue primarily through the letters of the news-writer John Chamberlain, in which he passed judgement and reported the judgements of others on a lengthy procession of recent deaths over a period of almost thirty years, from 1597 to 1626. Offering a valuable and perhaps unparalleled insight into contemporary attitudes, they reveal several additional dimensions to the model of a good death that Houlbrooke laid out in the chapter he devoted to good and bad deaths.<sup>3</sup> The article goes on to show that these criteria were important not only to Chamberlain and his circle but to contemporaries throughout early modern England.

A gentleman of independent means, Chamberlain was an avid follower of the latest news at court and about town, and sent lengthy reports addressed mainly to his friend the diplomat Dudley Carleton. Alongside news and gossip on court affairs and political issues, his letters contain a wealth of information on births, marriages and deaths among their own wide circle and other prominent families. Chamberlain’s letters do not suggest a man particularly devout or given to spiritual introspection, though he was a firm Protestant, strongly committed to the Established Church. He had no pity for the seminary priests executed at Tyburn, viewing them as a threat to public order and national security, and he was indignant when they were allowed to affirm their faith at the scaffold to the watching crowd. He was equally hostile to separatists and heretics, such as the Arian Bartholomew Legate, burned at Smithfield in 1612, and also disapproved of what he considered an excessive enthusiasm for sermons, a puritan trait.<sup>4</sup>

Chamberlain’s letters naturally reflected what he thought would be of interest to the recipients. It is at least possible that he had a more intense spiritual inner life than his worldly correspondence would suggest. He closed almost every letter by commending the recipient to the protection of the Almighty, and his will, drawn up in 1627, included a quite extensive religious preamble.<sup>5</sup> But the tone of his letters across thirty years remained consistent, whoever the recipient and whatever the circumstances. While Chamberlain was a loyal devotee of the Established Church, there is little to suggest that he was ever filled with spiritual fervour or assailed by religious doubts.

The most striking characteristic of Chamberlain's reports of recent deaths is indeed their worldly flavour. Rarely did he make any comment on the spiritual state of the deceased. And while he had rarely been present at the deathbed, that did not prevent him commenting freely on all other aspects. If he had missed or chosen to ignore a significant spiritual dimension, that would suggest what aspects he found of most interest and thought would most interest his friends. It would also suggest what had interested his informants, or those whose voices had shaped the opinion of what he called "the world". Chamberlain never married, and only two of the many deaths he reported were of close family members, his brothers George and Richard. George's demise in 1616 deeply saddened him, though even here he said very little on his spiritual condition. "Among other discommodities of age and long life this is not the least to loose our best friends", he observed, adding that he hoped his brother was now sleeping in the Lord ("*placide obdormavit in Domine*"). For many years Chamberlain lived with his last surviving sibling, Richard, but his brother's death in 1624 prompted comments only on his physical and mental condition in his final months, with none on his spiritual state or prospects. Perhaps there was nothing, or nothing positive, to be said.<sup>6</sup>

Chamberlain never spelled out his criteria for evaluating deaths, but they are fairly easy to reconstruct. Good deaths saw individuals dying ripe in years, with little pain, and retaining their mental faculties and power of speech until almost the end. They had been able to take leave of loved ones and set their affairs in good order, providing for dependants and making appropriate charitable bequests. They had died at peace with the world. These were all broadly in line with the model spelled out in the contemporary literature. But Chamberlain was also preoccupied with what he saw as the *timeliness* of a death, and with the importance of leaving behind a good name that would ensure the deceased was remembered with affection and respect. Houlbrooke notes rightly that in both Catholic and Protestant literature, "[t]he life after death is what matters", but the letters suggest that for Chamberlain and his very wide circle this was far from the case.<sup>7</sup>

Only rarely did the letters touch even briefly on the spiritual dimensions of a good death. One instance concerned his old friend William Gent, an Oxford academic, to whom he had written every week for years. Gent died in 1613 in extreme poverty, and Chamberlain felt he had been treated shabbily by his college. Little would be found in his room, he remarked, except "dust and cobwebs", but the "good man is gon to God I hope".<sup>8</sup> A few years later, in 1618, he reported more expansively that the eminent physician William Butler had died "very religiously of meere age and weaknes". Butler had received the sacrament a few days earlier, and had bequeathed £300 to his old college to make a communion cup of gold. His death was apparently painless, and he had been devout, respected, and charitable.<sup>9</sup> This was a comprehensively good end. It was Butler's role as one of the king's physicians that made him of interest to Chamberlain, who always refers to him as "Butler of Cambridge" and may not have known him personally.<sup>10</sup> That makes his comment on the edifying character of Butler's death all the more striking. As often, he was reporting second-hand accounts, and only rarely did such accounts have much to say on piety.

On two occasions, Chamberlain mentioned a pious death to comment that it had helped to atone for a more questionable life. In 1618 he reported that Lady Haddington, a worldly

figure at the court of James I, had died of smallpox, and that “they say (howsoever she lived) went away very virtuously”. The lady’s doubtful reputation had been salvaged, at least in part, by her pious end.<sup>11</sup> He made the point more emphatically on the execution of Walter Raleigh, in the same year. Chamberlain was well aware of the many crimes charged against Raleigh, but penned a glowing tribute on his death, without parallel in his correspondence. Though he had not attended, he passed on reports that Raleigh had “died very religiously, and every way like a Christian”. His dying speech, Chamberlain reported, had impressed the dean of Westminster, and “all that saw him confesse that his end was *omnibus numeris absolutus*, and as far as man can discern every way perfect”.<sup>12</sup> Raleigh’s execution was deeply unpopular, and widely blamed on the influence of the hated Spanish ambassador Gondomar. Chamberlain’s assessment reflected the public’s anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic sentiment.

Far more often the letters reported deaths that had failed to satisfy the criteria for a good death, and Chamberlain was usually ready to add disapproving comments. He was highly critical of those who had wilfully refused to accept their end was near, and had wasted their opportunity to prepare themselves. Anne of Denmark, James I’s consort, was among those blameworthy in this respect. Ignoring advice from the archbishop of Canterbury and other counsellors to set her affairs in order, she had kept her chamber-door locked, allowing only her Danish maid to attend her. Only after her sight failed were her son Prince Charles and a few others permitted to enter and approach the bedside. At least, Chamberlain added, “she had her speech to the last gaspe”.<sup>13</sup> Those who had neglected to make a will in good time earned similar criticism. When Sir John Fortescue, Chancellor the Duchy of Lancaster, died suddenly in 1607, he left no will, “which is thought straunge for a man of his yeares and state”. Dying intestate was likely to generate disputes and confusion, as happened on this occasion. Fortescue’s widow promptly carried away his goods, while his stepdaughter took possession of his house, land and furniture at Hendon. Chamberlain clearly felt the legitimate heir had been wronged.<sup>14</sup> When Flower Henshaw, widow of a wealthy London merchant, died similarly intestate in 1616, he commented drily that it would bring “a plentiful harvest” for the lawyers, with “her children striving and out-vieing for the administration of her goods”. Sir William Bird, Dean of the Arches, was still more at fault, for “he could not be perswaded to make a will”, presumably refusing to accept that his end was inevitable. Bird had been “generally so well spoken of”, however, that Chamberlain refrained from overt criticism.<sup>15</sup>

A good death saw the individual remain calm and at peace with the world. Chamberlain placed far more weight on the emotional state of the dying than on their spiritual state. He commented disapprovingly on several who had expired, instead, in a distressed mental condition. The town-clerk of London, for example, had died in 1613 “of the horne-sicknes”, after discovering his wife with her lover. The hurt and shame of his cuckoldry “drave him into such a distemper of melancholie and frensie that within fowre or five dayes made an end of him”. Distress of a different kind had driven Sir Richard Hawkins, a naval commander, to a similar end. Hawkins had been Vice-Admiral on Mansell’s expedition against Algiers in 1620-1, and after his return, “finding his reckonings come short of that he expected, of meere greife and discontent suncke downe before the Lords and died the next day”.<sup>16</sup> Others, even

on their deathbed, had foolishly refused to lay aside longstanding worldly concerns. The countess of Sussex had nursed a deep grievance against her unfaithful husband, and proved unable to set it aside. Chamberlain reported with patent disapproval that “her greatest care in leaving the world was that her Lord should not marrie his concubine (that was one Shutes widow)”. She had persuaded the archbishop of Canterbury to send an ecclesiastical court official to block any marriage-plans, but in vain; the earl had married his mistress the day after his wife’s death.<sup>17</sup>

In a few cases, Chamberlain described a death as comprehensively bad. The most wretched, endured in 1612 by a Mr Frier of Water-Eaton, Oxfordshire, had brought together mental, physical, material and religious elements in fearsome combination. Chamberlain heard the story from his friend William Gent and passed it on, apparently verbatim, to Carleton. Frier had lain “long sicke of the flixe and strangurie”, brought on by “greife and fretting” over a property dispute with the bishop of Oxford, which he stood to lose. He had reportedly then died “most pittifully in divers respects: both for great paines and no quietnes of mind: he renounced all religions, papistrie, protestancie, puritanisme and all other, and tooke himself only to God, and so spitting out his lunges, went away in furie and blaspheming the priest, by which name he called our bishop”.<sup>18</sup> Better known was the scandalous case of Sir Thomas Overbury, who died and was buried in the Tower in 1613. Notorious as the arrogant favourite of the king’s favourite, Robert Carr, earl of Somerset, Overbury had become embroiled in court intrigues and attempted to block the divorce of the earl and countess of Essex, which the countess wanted so she could marry Carr. To silence him, the king had Overbury closely confined in the Tower, where he fell sick and died. His death prompted Chamberlain to comment that “he was a very unfortunat man, for nobody almost pities him, and his very friends speake but indifferently of him”. Overbury’s end had been lamentable in almost every respect: he had died alone in his cell, while the “fowlenes” of his corpse prompted rumours that he had died of the pox “or somewhat worse”. An autopsy revealed that he had probably been poisoned, and triggered a political upheaval that saw the downfall of both Carr and the countess.<sup>19</sup>

As already noted, one of Chamberlain’s most striking preoccupations was the *timeliness* of a death, by which he meant that it had come in circumstances that had allowed all or most of the criteria for a good end to be satisfied. It was no blessing to outlive one’s mental faculties and physical strength, a feeling he expressed plainly as he watched the decline of his dear friend Sir Rowland Lytton. He “growes fast into decay as well of mind as body”, he reported sadly in 1614; “as well as I love him, I shold lesse grieve to loose him then to see him outlive himself.” Lytton clearly did outlive himself; when Chamberlain reported news of his death about a year later, he added that “the greatest part of that grieffe was past over long since”.<sup>20</sup> He felt similarly on the death of William Camden, the antiquary, in 1623, commenting that it “moves me the lesse for that he had drouped long, and was not himself these two yeares and more”. Citing Cicero, he voiced a firm conviction that it was better to die if “wit and sense” were already lost. It would have been better had Camden died sooner.<sup>21</sup> The death of his own brother Richard, a few months later, prompted reflections that echoed Jaques’s famous

description in *As You Like It* of the pitiful seventh age of man, “*Sans* teeth, *sans* eyes, *sans* taste, *sans* everything”:

his great age of 76 and many infirmities made his losse the lesse lamented, beeing deprived of his sight, and in a manner of his hearing, feeling, taste, and all other senses save smelling, which with his memorie continued perfect to the last gaspe: so that his life was not of late time, *vita vitalis*, and a man might verifie in him *Non est vivere sed valere vita*.<sup>22</sup>

His brother had outlived himself.

Equally untimely were sudden and unexpected deaths. Henry Howard, for example, had died “sodainly at the table without speaking one word as most say”, probably after a stroke or heart-attack, leaving a young and pregnant wife.<sup>23</sup> Howard had been unable to prepare himself or his friends, through no fault of his own. Far worse, in every respect, were sudden deaths occasioned by the individual’s own rash behaviour. Viscount Haddington’s brother had died one night in 1616 in a brawl “as he was swaggering with the watch in Gracious street ... they say a dung-farmer gave him his deaths wound”. It was an ignominious end, with no opportunity to set his affairs in order, settle his mind, and take leave of family and friends. Moreover, it had left him with a sordid reputation that could never be repaired.<sup>24</sup>

Closely linked to the timeliness of a death was the “good name” that the deceased had left behind, also a key criterion in Chamberlain’s judgement. Family and friends could take comfort from the knowledge that the departed had been loved, admired and respected. Chamberlain made the point most emphatically on the death of his friend Sir Henry Fanshawe in 1616; he had died “much lamented and so generally well spoken of as I have not knowne any man, which is no small comfort to those that loved him”. For his widow, it was “indeed no small comfort to her to heare him so generally lamented and well spoken of”. Dying in such high esteem might bring material as well as psychological benefits, and did so on this occasion. Fanshawe had held an Exchequer office with the right to pass it on to an adult son, but at the time of his death his son was still underage. Fanshawe’s friends, Chamberlain among them, lobbied vigorously on his son’s behalf, and the Secretary of State intervened to ensure that he would still inherit the office, with a deputy serving temporarily as proxy. The intervention, according to Chamberlain, had met with “generall applause”.<sup>25</sup>

Friends could certainly find comfort in recalling the virtues of the deceased, and the affection they had inspired. But when the person had died young, these same qualities inevitably sharpened their grief, and the untimeliness of the death outweighed the blessing of the good name they left behind. That was the case with the death of Elizabeth Windham, daughter of Chamberlain’s late friend Sir Rowland Lytton, in 1622. Her rapid and unexpected death from smallpox had been “to the great grieffe and discomfort of the frends especially of her husband, of whom she was entirely beloved, and not without cause for she hath left the report and reputation of an excellent wife”. In this instance, her qualities and glowing reputation had intensified their grief rather than bringing comfort. Her youth and previous good health made her death untimely and inappropriate. Elizabeth had married only two years earlier, and she

left behind an infant daughter a few months old. The life she had been so well equipped to lead, as wife, mother, and chatelaine, had been cruelly snatched away.<sup>26</sup>

Chamberlain's comments on the timeliness of a person's death went far beyond issues of age to address their worldly circumstances, financial, political, or reputational. On financial issues he often simply repeated the talk on the street, reporting that "they say" the deceased had died rich or poor, or richer or poorer than expected.<sup>27</sup> In other cases he was able to include some detail, passed on by someone close to the family. Ideally, the deceased had made good provision for his wife and children, with his estate settled by a well-drafted will. The widowed countess of Hertford, he reported, would enjoy a jointure of £4,000 a year, with a house in fashionable Channon Row and a country house and park within thirty miles of London. Her welfare was secure, at least in material terms.<sup>28</sup> He rarely commented in any detail on those who had died in poverty or debt, and the plight of their families. But he did note the unfortunate situation facing the widow of Sir Robert Wroth, who had died of gangrene and the pox in 1614. Though his young widow Mary had a jointure of £1,200, she also had a new-born baby son who would now inherit his father's huge debts of £23,000. Lady Mary went on to find fame as a poet, through her *Urania*, an extended religious meditation; her baby died at the age of three.<sup>29</sup>

The death in 1621 of Robert Shute, newly appointed Recorder of London, had been deeply untimely, for he had enjoyed his office less than a fortnight, far too short to make any advantage from it, and died "a very pore man every way".<sup>30</sup> Sir Ralph Winwood, who died in office in 1617 as Secretary of State, would also have felt his own demise untimely. But in this instance Chamberlain commented that "seeing yt was Gods pleasure to call him, he could never go in a better time then when he was in his highest favor with the King, Quene, Prince, and principall favourite, and was generally growne into so good opinion, that his sicknes first, and then his death, was as much lamented, as ever I knew any of his rancke". As an avid observer of court politics, Chamberlain knew that those who reached the top rarely retained favour for long, and that reputation might well prove equally fickle. Winwood had amassed a good estate and had made excellent provision for his wife, sons and daughters. His honour and high reputation were secure. The archbishop of Canterbury had professed great affection for his memory, and kindness for his family, while Francis Bacon's disparaging remarks had backfired and been "much disliked". Winwood's death, untimely in material respects, had been perfectly timed for his posthumous reputation.<sup>31</sup> The marquis of Hamilton (d.1625), a cousin of the king, had the similar fortune to die with his honour and reputation intact. "He is much lamented", Chamberlain reported, "as a very noble gentleman and the flowre of that nation". His reputation was sufficiently strong for Chamberlain to dismiss out of hand attempts by "papists" to claim him now as secretly "one of theirs". Nothing in Hamilton's life or death gave any substance to their claims, he insisted, and "yt is no new thing with them to raise such scandalls and slaunders".<sup>32</sup>

In other instances Chamberlain judged a death timely in having saved an individual or family from the threat of impending poverty or dishonour. This consideration shaped his coolly balanced appraisal of the death of Lady Anne Webbe, another daughter of his friend Rowland Lytton, on Christmas Day 1612. "She was growne a very proper woman," he reported, "but

loved this town too well, which in short time wold have drawne her and her husband drie, as well in purse as in reputation". He thought her honest and virtuous, "yet some courses and companie she kept began to breed speach, so that all things considered, her frends have the lesse cause to lament her losse, specially seeing she made a very goode and godly end: and did so far foresee the miserie that long life might have brought her to, that she went willingly". So this had been a good as well as timely end. By an early, calm and unexpectedly pious death, she had saved her family from financial and reputational disaster, and had hopefully saved her soul too. Chamberlain's phraseology suggests that he may have viewed the components of her "good death" in that order of importance.<sup>33</sup>

The death of his friend Sir Christopher Hatton prompted a similarly cool assessment. Hatton owned a good estate but when he died intestate in 1619 he was deep in debt, and had made no provision for his younger sons or his daughters. Those close to him told themselves that his death had been timely, for had he lived longer "he wold have much weakened, yf not ruined his whole estate: beeing of so easie and kinde nature that he could denie nothing to his friends or kinred, who wrought upon him extraordinarily". Now he was gone, it might be possible to rescue the situation "yf goode order be taken", and ensure a decent provision for the children. In most other respects this had been a bad death. Hatton's excessive liberality and poor judgement meant that he had failed to provide adequately for his wife and children, had run his estate into debt, and had neglected to make a will. Only by dying in a timely manner, with just enough time for others to rescue the situation, could his end be considered satisfactory.<sup>34</sup>

A timely death might similarly avert the danger of political disgrace or worse. Sir Roger Owen, who sat in the parliament of 1614, had incurred the wrath of the crown and Privy Council by his opposition to impositions, and was in danger of forfeiting his estate. Chamberlain blamed the physicians for hastening his end in 1617, by purges and bloodletting, but added, "I thincke he had a goode end, for yt is not likely that ever he wold have become his owne man in this world".<sup>35</sup> He expressed similar views on the death of the king's chief minister, Robert Cecil, earl of Salisbury. Cecil died in 1612 still possessed of his high office, but his star was clearly waning. Chamberlain concluded that "as the case stands yt was best that he gave over the world, for they say his frends fell from him apace" during his long illness, and had he recovered, "yt is verely thought, he wold never have ben himself again in power and credit". His death had come too late to protect or preserve his reputation. Within a few weeks, Chamberlain reported, Cecil's good name was under relentless attack, with a torrent of libels and allegations of evil practices and false dealing "with frends, foes and generally with all". His death had been timely in saving him from the threat of political disgrace, but too late to protect his good name.<sup>36</sup>

For those whose names were already damaged beyond repair, Chamberlain viewed death as a blessing. The death of Lady Elizabeth Stanhope in April 1616 was, in his eyes, "no yll turne for her after her late disgrace of having a daughter (as is saide) by Sir Eustace Hart". But "the world talkes somewhat suspitiously of her end", he added, and the possibility of poisoning or suicide saw a whiff of scandal attending her in death as well as life.<sup>37</sup> Charles Blount, earl of Devonshire, had been mired in far deeper scandal over his very public relationship with the wife of Lord Rich. The couple had six children and eventually married after Rich divorced



his wife, but the marriage was of dubious legality and it had turned Blount into a social pariah. As he lay dangerously sick in 1606, Chamberlain reported, “the world thinckes yf he shold go now, yt had ben better for him yf he had gon a yeare or two sooner”. His death a few weeks later, at the age of 43, prompted the comment that it was “early for his yeares but late enough for himself and happy had he been yf he had gon two or three yeares since, before the world was wearie of him, or that he had left that scandall behinde him”.<sup>38</sup> Sir George Gifford’s death in 1613 was dismissed with the pithy remark that his “losse I thincke had ben lesse both for himself and his posteritie yf he had gon thirty yeares ago”.<sup>39</sup> His failings were evidently too familiar to need rehearsing.

Chamberlain’s final set of criteria related to the behaviour of the deceased’s kin, the funeral, and the disposal of the estate. Like most educated contemporaries, he considered extravagant displays of grief unseemly. A good death would see family and friends mourn their loss with restraint and decorum. The duchess of Richmond, he reported, had flouted convention by cutting off her hair, “with divers other demonstrations of extraordinarie grieffe”. While conceding that she had indeed lost an excellent husband, he suspected she was grief-stricken because his death had also spelled the end of her own sway at court.<sup>40</sup> Equally bad, however, was a death that no one lamented and that left no memory to be honoured. In 1602 Chamberlain attended the funeral of old “Mistris Davers”, where, he reported, there was no mourning, while Sir Owen Oglethorp (d.1616) had departed the world “leaving litle or nothing (they say) behind him scant so much as a goode name”.<sup>41</sup>

A good funeral would be dignified and orderly, well attended, and followed by refreshments and the distribution of small bequests to friends, servants, and charitable causes. Chamberlain was impressed by the funeral in 1602 of Anne Lytton, wife of his friend Rowland, performed “very orderly and with goode solemnitie”. Though Rowland, devastated by grief, had failed in his efforts to “put on sometimes a philosophicall, sometimes a Christian resolution”, the funeral itself had followed the conventions of decency and decorum.<sup>42</sup> Many others were far less satisfactory. Sir Philip Butler of Woodhall, Herts., was buried in 1606 “with as much pompe as this place could affoord, though there were very small provision for the poore and otherwise a very drie funerall, for I heard not of a teare shed but by his owne Lady”.<sup>43</sup> And not all funerals proceeded with decorum. A noisy quarrel had broken out at the funeral of Henry Lord Norris in 1601, involving a senior royal official, which Chamberlain considered deplorable. He was shocked too by news that that a six-penny dole distributed after the funeral of the wife of the Lord Mayor of London, a few weeks later, had attracted such an “excessive and unreasonable” swarm of beggars that seventeen had been trampled to death and many others injured.<sup>44</sup> Remembering the poor was an admirable quality in testators and the executors of their wills, but as in all things, it was important to observe moderation and maintain order. The duchess of Richmond was as extravagant in the funeral she arranged for her husband as in her outpourings of grief. It was more lavish than Queen Anne’s funeral, and Chamberlain considered it wholly inappropriate for a mere subject. He added that many peers agreed and had refused to play the roles she had assigned for them.<sup>45</sup>

Aristocratic families also faced criticism, however, if their arrangements fell short of expectations. The earl of Exeter was buried in Westminster Abbey in 1623, and the family

had commissioned the archbishop of Canterbury to preach the funeral sermon. But when no dinner or supper was provided, “nor so much as a cup of drinke, yt was called a drie funeral”.<sup>46</sup> Chamberlain also disapproved of a new fashion among the elite to bury their dead very privately, and sometimes by night. This might be merely a way to reduce expense, but he suspected it was being exploited “by papists which serve theyre turn by yt many ways”.<sup>47</sup> Henry Howard, earl of Northampton (d.1614), had provided liberally for his kin and close servants, but the merit of these generous arrangements was outweighed by his direction that he was to be buried privately in a chapel in Dover Castle, where it was reported he had received the Catholic sacrament of extreme unction. Howard had also flouted another convention, by writing to the king shortly before his death urging him not to appoint old enemies to high office. When death approached, a man was expected to turn away from worldly concerns, not pursue old feuds. “These and such other passages made the world speake hardly of him”, Chamberlain reported, “and to say *ut vixit sic morixit*”, as he lived, so he died.<sup>48</sup>

Most deaths predictably mirrored most lives in containing both commendable and reprehensible or regrettable elements. They had met in full some of the criteria applied by Chamberlain and “the world”, while falling short in others. His friend Sir Henry Fanshawe suffered an untimely death, felled by a stroke in 1616, but in other respects it had been more than satisfactory; he had made his will and settled his affairs two years earlier, and it was “a great happines to himself that his memorie continued till the very end, and his speach did not quite faile till some three or fowre houres before his departure”.<sup>49</sup> Chamberlain’s lengthy assessment of the death of Lord Chancellor Thomas Egerton in 1617 offers a particularly striking example, with the balance tipping the other way. Egerton died with a fortune and lands reputedly worth at least £12,000 a year, and high in royal favour. Disdaining vain pomp, he had asked for a modest funeral and no monument, following the guidance of the Stoic philosopher Seneca. But his death had been untimely. He had been planning to step down from his high office, and only hours before his death learned that the king had resolved to confer on him an earldom with a pension of £3,000 a year for life. Egerton was reported to have expressed his deep gratitude, while also observing that in his condition “these thinges were all to him mere vanities.” By faith or philosophy, he could rise above the unhappy timing of his death. By another unfortunate accident of timing, however, his son and heir lay “bound hand and foote with the gowte” and unable to attend the deathbed or funeral. And while these unfortunate circumstances had been beyond Egerton’s control, his shortcomings in his professional career cast a far deeper shadow over his end and his posthumous reputation. Chamberlain reported that he had “left but an indifferent name beeing accounted too sowre, severe and implacable, a great ennemie to parlements and the common law, only to maintain his owne greatnes and the exorbitant jurisdiction of his court of chauncerie”. In a single sentence Chamberlain packed a formidable catalogue of failings. Moreover, it was noted that in his will Egerton had left very little to his grandchildren and nothing to his servants, the poor, or any other charitable cause.<sup>50</sup>

Charitable bequests had a firm place among Chamberlain’s criteria for judging a death. In his own will, he left generous legacies to his kin and friends, a bequest to a close servant, sums to

the poor of the London parishes where he had been raised or resided, and further sums to poor prisoners and to the “poor distracted people in Bedlem”.<sup>51</sup> Many years earlier he had been impressed to hear that Sir Mathew Arundell, a Wiltshire gentleman, had “left much to goode uses, as 2000<sup>li</sup> to the making of a cawsey [causeway] about Sherborne, and 2000<sup>li</sup> to the poore, and many other legacies of like nature”.<sup>52</sup> But magnanimous legacies were never the most important element in a good death, and if they came at the expense of family, friends and other dependants, they no longer deserved commendation. The longest and most damning of all Chamberlain’s accounts described the death of Sir Thomas Bodley, founder of Oxford’s great library. Bodley left the huge sum of £7,000 for the library with a further £200 for Merton College, and by this criterion his end had been not merely meritorious but magnificent. The merit of this largesse was cancelled, however, by what Chamberlain saw as shameful failings on the other criteria. Bodley treated his family poorly in his will, and ignored old friends. Chamberlain had known him for forty years, and commented tartly that he had been left nothing as a token. He was far more vexed by Bodley’s treatment of their old mutual friend William Gent. Bodley’s will forgave all the debts he was owed by Gent, but Gent insisted that he had owed not a penny, which meant that far from being a generous gesture, this had been an act of gratuitous and public unkindness. Bodley had treated his servants poorly too, even those who had been in his service for ten or twenty years. He had been so carried away, Chamberlain concluded, “with the vanitie and vaine glorie of his librarie that he forgat all other respects and duties (almost) of conscience, frendship or goode nature”. He had abandoned his old friends when he had no more use of them, preferring “to flatter and currie favor with the higher powers”. These multiple failings brought a predictable backlash when the provisions of the will became public, and “for ought I heare there is scant any body pleased”. His servants “murmure and grumble most”, Chamberlain reported, with “clamors and complaints” spreading even before the funeral. And “all this for a vain-glorie, and shew of good deeds”. Bodley’s death had also failed to satisfy one more criterion. In good deaths, the dying retained their mental faculties until almost the end, enabling them to bid farewell to loved ones and to be at peace with the world. Bodley, by contrast, had died “having lien speachles and without knowing anybody almost thirty howres”. Chamberlain reported this detail without comment, but there is a hint of satisfaction at a miserable end he would have seen as thoroughly deserved.<sup>53</sup>

Chamberlain’s judgements were naturally coloured by his personal character and tastes, and his sense of decorum. The most striking features of his reports are their worldly flavour, the prominence he gives to the timeliness of a death, and the good name or reputational afterlife of the deceased. The three strands were all closely linked. Some of his comments of timeliness related to the individual’s mental or physical state in their last weeks or months, but just as often he was describing their worldly circumstances. A death at any age might be timely if it spared a family from financial ruin or disgrace, while if the good name of the deceased had already been compromised or lost, a timely death would provide damage-limitation and closure, and perhaps a measure of atonement. The good name of the deceased was a major consideration for Chamberlain, the families of the bereaved, and “the world”.

It would obviously be rash to place too much weight on the representativeness of one individual's judgements. Moreover, only in a minority of cases had Chamberlain been an intimate friend of the deceased, and still more rarely had he attended the deathbed. Very often he was thus relying on information provided by others and reflecting their assessments, as he acknowledged in verbal constructions such as "they say", "I hear", and "the world says". This may be more a strength than a limitation, however, for it suggests a broad public consensus on the criteria for judging a death. Some of the elements are predictable. Ideally, the deceased would have died peacefully and ripe in years, having made good provision for their dependants. Like Chamberlain, "the world" appears to have had little interest in the spiritual state of the dying or their fate in the hereafter. Perhaps such issues had never been of much concern to those outside the immediate family and intimate friends of the deceased. If the representativeness of Chamberlain's assessments remains open to question, so too does that of the spiritually-centred deathbed scenes that emanated from the ranks of the godly. These dominated the accounts that found their way into print, and filled the pages of spiritual journals, and they have heavily influenced the historiography. Chamberlain's evidence provides a corrective that helps balance the picture.

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How far do other early modern sources, with different social and regional origins and a wider time-frame, match Chamberlain in their characterisation of a good death? There is space here for only a brief survey. Richard Smyth's *Obituary* recorded roughly 2,000 deaths, mainly of acquaintances, in the period 1627-75, though he often noted only the date and cause of death. Like Chamberlain, he ignored the spiritual dimension while displaying a similarly strong interest in the good or bad name the dead had left behind. Some were thus remembered briefly as "honest", "a good servant but a bad husband", "a wise, and well-governed gentlewoman", "a woman of good report, sober, discreet, and good-conditioned", "a woman very free of her tongue", "no good husband", an "industrious man in his profession", and so on.<sup>54</sup>

The scattered evidence we find in diaries, journals and other personal writings confirms contemporaries' interest in judging as well as recording deaths. When two elderly neighbours on the Isle of Wight died within a week in October 1648, Sir John Oglander remarked on a "great deal of difference in their sickness, death and burial". One, he noted, had received many visitors, including several ministers, as he lay sick, and he had died confident of enjoying God's grace and sure of salvation. A "great assembly" of gentry and others had attended his funeral. By contrast, Sir William Lisle had died "in a nasty chamber", all that his unkind son would allow him, and had refused all visitors, even his wife and children. He was buried privately in the evening, and no gentlemen were invited. Oglander, a friend of both men, reflected that Lisle's unhappy marriage and profligate life had brought him to a miserable end.<sup>55</sup>

Contemporaries could naturally agree that an easy, painless death was a blessing, especially when it was accompanied by a tranquil mind. Queen Elizabeth was said to have died "mildly like a lambe, easily like a ripe apple from the tree". William Stout (d.1681), a Lancashire

yeoman, had “expired as if fallen asleep”, enjoying “composure of mind and resignation to the will of God”. His family took great comfort from this “sweet frame of mind”. John Cannon (d.1723), an elderly Somerset farmer, had similarly died “in a very calm & sedate manner”, with his son at his bedside.<sup>56</sup> By contrast, Charles II died in 1685 “in very exquisite paines for about five hours before he departed. He had much vigor of nature to spend, and therefore the greater Conflict with death.”<sup>57</sup>

Dutiful children sometimes depicted parental deaths as having been exemplary in every respect. Ogländer recorded that his father, Sir William (d.1609), had “lived well and died well, *et manet post funera virtus*. He made a happy end, comfortable to himself and comfortable to all his friends”. The pious naturally included, and emphasised, the spiritual dimension. Thus Alice Thornton described how her father, Christopher Wandesford (d.1640), had accepted his approaching death with a calm submission to God’s will, and died quietly in confident hope of salvation, “beloved of his prince and country”, and “generally lamented”. Sir John Bramston, who died in 1654 aged 78, had set his affairs in good order, retained his senses to the end, and enjoyed peace of mind. “I haue noethinge to doe but to dye”, he assured those around his sickbed, “and I hope I am prepared well for my change”. Frescheville Holles, recognising that death was approaching, had similarly cast aside all worldly concerns and “praepared himselfe piously and chearfully to meet it”, setting his affairs in order and dying calmly.<sup>58</sup>

Pious children sometimes had to confront the uncomfortable fact that a parent’s death had been far from ideal. Some responded by reporting only the positive elements, passing silently over those less palatable. Adam Martindale, a nonconformist, described his mother as having been universally beloved while saying nothing of the circumstances of her end. He made the best he could of the fact that his father Henry had not been religious by describing how he had offered the dying man spiritual counsel and had arranged a very honourable funeral.<sup>59</sup> Alice Thornton faced a very different challenge: how to accommodate the fact that her deeply pious mother had endured two weeks of excruciating pain before her death. Alice described her suffering in vivid detail but emphasised her unwavering faith and submission to God’s will, which had made her a “patorne of pietie, faith, of fortitude and resolution”. Her funeral had been a model of godly decorum, twelve ministers bearing her body to the grave, while “Infinit numbers of poore were served by dolle at the doore”.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, James Yonge, a plain-spoken Plymouth surgeon, made no attempt to idealise family deathbed-scenes. For many years his relationship with both his parents and siblings had been fractious, and old resentments coloured his accounts and assessments. While a good death would see the individual at peace with the world, Yonge reported that his father had died in 1679 full of “melancholy and discontent”, remorseful for the wrongs he had done his son, and anxious to be reconciled. “He died in very good charity with me”, Yonge noted, but throughout his final sickness had “hated the sight of my brother and was discontented with my mother”. Yonge could not hide his satisfaction that his father had died at odds with the other family members. Twenty years later he afforded his mother’s death only a single, impersonal sentence, commenting merely that she had “enjoyed her memory &c to the last”.<sup>61</sup>

Most diaries and journals were written by members of the gentry or professional classes. The diary of James Fretwell, a Yorkshire tanner writing a century after Chamberlain, offers a different social perspective, but his frank comments on his parents and friends suggest a similar set of criteria, including an emphasis on the timeliness of a death. It had come far too late for his long-suffering parents. His mother died in 1736 after years of painful infirmities, and had been more than ready to go. She was “sensible to the last”, and was remembered lovingly as an excellent wife, mother and neighbour. Death had also come as a welcome release to his father, blind, deaf, bedridden, and in great pain. It was a good death only in that the end, when it came, had at least been easy: “His death seemed to be only a cessation of breathing, without the least groan or struggle”. In neither case did Fretwell mention any spiritual comfort, assurance, or concerns.<sup>62</sup>

Fretwell also commented on the timeliness (or otherwise) of many other deaths he recorded. Death had come far too soon for his cousin, a “very sober, hopeful young man” and the main support of his widowed mother and younger siblings. John Herrot also died relatively young, but in all other respects his had been a good death. He “seemed to be noways discomposed” by its untimeliness, and assured Fretwell, “I am very well content to die”. He enjoyed his reason to the last, and in a devout frame of mind “very quietly resign’d up his soul”. Death came too late, however, for Reuben Woodhouse, a former butter-merchant. Once a respected citizen, fond of poetry and excellent company, he had become a profligate drunkard, squandering his estate, and his standing and good name had been lost beyond recall. Fretwell commented drily that his old mother “had buried all her children except him, and I believe could have been glad to have buried him too”.<sup>63</sup>

Many other writers shared a strong interest in the timeliness of a death. William Stout (d.1752), a Quaker tradesman, thought his former master, Henry Coward, had lived too long, for he too had died with his good name already lost. Once “much respected by people of all ranks and professions”, Coward’s misguided behaviour had left him deep in debt, with his reputation shattered. It “broke his heart”, Stout recalled, and he had “dyed for greif or shame”.<sup>64</sup> Ralph Josselin, a minister, was saddened by the sudden death in February 1649 of his friend Edward Cressener, an Essex gentleman, but reflected that in all other respects it had been timely: “he was quite worne out, and dyed in a good old age: and in a good time, before troubles which he very much feared”, an allusion, perhaps, to the king’s execution two weeks earlier.<sup>65</sup>

Like Chamberlain, most contemporaries pitied a sudden death, especially when apparently healthy people dropped dead after a heart-attack or stroke or died in accidents, unable to set their affairs in order or prepare themselves. And like Chamberlain, they had no sympathy for those who had brought an untimely death on themselves, by their drunkenness, debauchery, or folly. One Yorkshire diarist recorded several deaths from “excessive drinking”, including a gentleman who had too exuberantly celebrated the birth of his son and heir. John Cannon was scandalised by the folly of a man who had entered an alehouse known to be infected with smallpox, “daring his creator”, for a wager of 6 shillings. He had lost his wager and his life.<sup>66</sup>

Scenes that transgressed the ideal of loving family members gathered around the deathbed brought similarly strong disapproval. Cannon described the sordid death of a drunkard surrounded by his drinking companions, one of whom, “mopping up the nauseous matter of the corps”, had dashed it in jest over the face of the dead man’s wife. Years earlier he had witnessed an equally shocking scene at Glastonbury, after being summoned one night by a neighbour, William Parfet, to write the will of his dying mother. The family was notorious for ill-rule and feuds, and Parfet’s brother, barred from entering the house, had retaliated by hurling abuse through the window, calling his dying mother whore and devil. He then threatened to burn down the house, and a constable had to be summoned.<sup>67</sup> Family friction could blight funerals as well as deathbeds. When “old Molins”, an Essex villager, died in 1645, his son and grandchildren pointedly refused to attend the funeral, while another disgruntled son caused offence by cursing his father on the day he was buried.<sup>68</sup>

Contemporaries also shared Chamberlain’s disapproval of those who had wilfully failed to provide for their widows and children. James Yonge was disgusted that his sister’s husband, who left her with two children, had “regarded neither them nor her in his will”, favouring instead his first wife’s children.<sup>69</sup> Wealthy men who had failed to make suitable charitable bequests faced criticism too. The minister conducting the funeral of Daniel Taylor, a wealthy London merchant and one of the godly, felt obliged to rebut criticism that he had been parsimonious in his charitable bequests.<sup>70</sup> Dr John Wall of Christ Church, Oxford (d.1686) did leave generous bequests but, as with Sir Thomas Bodley, they were considered inappropriate. Wall had left over £2,000 to the city of Oxford but nothing to his college or the university, which was seen as a deliberate snub to his colleagues. In retaliation they boycotted his funeral, and one was reported to have smashed his windows on the day he died.<sup>71</sup>

The testamentary arrangements made by the deceased had an obvious bearing on the final key criterion many contemporaries shared with Chamberlain in judging a death: the good or bad name they had left behind. It was a critical component in assessments of and by rich and poor alike. Even the obscure could be honoured and remembered as a good father, mother, spouse, or neighbour, or honest and good in their occupation. Richard Smyth’s *Obituary* included a humble comfit-maker, commemorated engagingly as “the best chiscake-maker” in Shoreditch.<sup>72</sup> Equally, a figure once important in the local community could face posthumous obloquy. Anthony Wood, who generally recorded deaths without comment, dismissed an Oxford ironmonger as a “very obnoxious person; an ill neighbour”, quarrelsome and litigious. Cannon noted similarly that one John Applin had died in 1739 “unlamented by the whole town”, and that his funeral saw “few tears shed by his son, relations or any other persons”. John Roach of West Pennard fared still worse, leaving “a name tainted with dishonesty ... insomuch that many said God was not pleased with his oppression & unjust dealing, & so cut him off in his prime to make way for an honest plant to grow in his room”.<sup>73</sup> Thomas Gyll, an eighteenth-century Durham lawyer, made the good or bad name of the deceased the main focus of his notes, and was liberal with both accolades and brickbats. He dismissed the wife of an esquire as a garrulous drunkard, “a woman of no importance”, and an army officer as a “worthless animal”. By contrast, others were commemorated as “very honest”, “learned and amiable”, “an excellent officer”, and “a very good pater-familias, and a man of integrity”.<sup>74</sup>

Death in early modern England was at once intensely personal and a matter of public scrutiny and judgement. For the godly, the destination of the soul was undoubtedly the paramount concern, but they too recognised the importance of material considerations, especially the importance of providing adequately for dependants. For much of the population, throughout the period, such provision may well have been the primary criterion, and it had an obvious bearing on the sense of a death as timely or untimely. Equally striking is the weight that family, friends, and acquaintances attached to the good or bad name the deceased had left behind. Historians have long stressed the vital importance of reputation at all levels of early modern society, and it is evident that a good name remained important after death, especially for the family and friends of the deceased. It had mattered greatly to some of the dying themselves, like the vainglorious Bodley or the fallen Quaker, Henry Coward, who had hidden himself away and died of shame. It had also mattered to Sir George Holles, a professional soldier who had wanted to be remembered for a brave death in battle. Instead he died in bed of consumption, mortified by what he called such a “lazy death”.<sup>75</sup> In early modern England, contemporaries had a clear and remarkably enduring sense of what constituted a good death. And it would appear that for many, how they would be remembered in this world—their posthumous good name—mattered as much as their fate in the next.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 389.

<sup>2</sup> Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family*; Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual*; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, chaps. 17-19; Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*; see also Gordon and Marshall, eds., *The Place of the Dead*.

<sup>3</sup> Houlbrooke, *Death*, chap. 7.

<sup>4</sup> McClure, ed. *Letters of John Chamberlain* [hereafter Chamberlain, *Letters*], i.138-9, 337, 343, 355, 397-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* ii.632-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* i.616, ii.544.

<sup>7</sup> Houlbrooke, *Death*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, i.447.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* ii.137

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* i.336, 346, 388, 413, 559, ii.54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* ii.193.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* ii.175-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* ii.219-20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* i.248-9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* i.616, ii.579.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* i.440, ii.433. On the Algiers expedition see Hebb, *Piracy and the English Government*, chaps. 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, ii.533-4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, i.335. Flix was dysentery, strangury a painful affliction of the urinary tract.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, i.478. On the scandal see Bellamy, *Politics of Court Scandal*.

<sup>20</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, i.547, 605.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* ii.524.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* ii.544 (‘Life is not existing but being healthy’); *As You Like It*, II.vii.167

<sup>23</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, ii.24.



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- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, ii.11.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, i.615, 621-2.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, ii.444; cf. ii.330, 430.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, e.g. i.31, 52, 393, 395, ii.105.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, ii.364.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, i.519, ii.16, 427. For Lady Mary see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter *ODNB*]
- <sup>30</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, ii.343.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, ii.108-9, 123.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, ii.604-5.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, i.400.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, ii.262, 265.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, ii.79; cf. i.539, ii.76.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, i.351, 364-5.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, i.626.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, i.222, 226.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, i.457. On Blount see *ONDB*.
- <sup>40</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, ii.545-6.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, i.150, ii.7.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, i.138.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, i.240.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, i.128, 135.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, ii.551, 554.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, ii.483.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, i.578; cf. ii.7.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, i.541-2; *ODNB*.
- <sup>49</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, i.615.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, ii.65; *ODNB*.
- <sup>51</sup> Chamberlain, *Letters*, ii.632-5.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid, i.64.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid, i.413-14, 416-17, 420.
- <sup>54</sup> Ellis, ed. *Obituary of Richard Smyth*, 18, 35, 42, 57, 76, 79, 92.
- <sup>55</sup> Bamford, ed., *A Royalist's Notebook*, 123-5.
- <sup>56</sup> Sorlien, ed., *Diary of John Manningham*, 208; Marshall, ed. *Autobiography of William Stout*, 73-4; Money, ed. *Chronicles of John Cannon*, i.171; Houlbrooke, *Death*, 202-4.
- <sup>57</sup> Spurr, ed., *The Entering Book Of Roger Morrice*, 509.
- <sup>58</sup> Bamford, *Royalist's Notebook*, 174; Jackson, ed., *Autobiography of Alice Thornton*, 21-5; Braybrooke, ed., *Autobiography of Sir John Bramston*, 95-6; Wood, ed., *Memorials of the Holles Family*, 198-200.
- <sup>59</sup> Parkinson, ed., *Life of Adam Martindale*, 17, 119-20.
- <sup>60</sup> Jackson, ed., *Autobiography of Alice Thornton*, 106-17.
- <sup>61</sup> Poynter, ed., *Journal of James Yonge*, 161, 209.
- <sup>62</sup> Jackson, ed., "A family history begun by James Fretwell", 216-17, 221-6.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid, 201, 213-14, 231-2.
- <sup>64</sup> Marshall, *Autobiography of William Stout*, 120-1.
- <sup>65</sup> Macfarlane, ed., *Diary of Josselin*, 156.
- <sup>66</sup> Jackson, ed., "Journal of Mr John Hobson", 272, 293, 298, 321; Money, *Chronicles of John Cannon*, ii.484; Houlbrooke, *Death*, 199, 207-8.
- <sup>67</sup> Money, *Chronicles of John Cannon*, i.175, ii.346.

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- <sup>68</sup> Macfarlane, ed., *Diary of Josselin*, 38; “Journal of John Thomlinson”, 112.
- <sup>69</sup> Poynter, *Journal of James Yonge*, 147.
- <sup>70</sup> Goodwin, *Mercy in her Exaltation*, sig. a4v-b.
- <sup>71</sup> Clark, ed., *Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, ii.90.
- <sup>72</sup> Ellis, ed., *Obituary of Richard Smyth*, 85.
- <sup>73</sup> Clark, ed., *Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, ii.318; Money, ed., *Chronicles of John Cannon*, ii.315-16, 429.
- <sup>74</sup> “Journal of Thomas Gyll”, 208, 217, 226, 227, 221.
- <sup>75</sup> Wood, ed., *Memorials of the Holles Family*, 76-7.

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