

Jennifer Louise Heller. *The Mother's Legacy in Early Modern England*. Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. ix + 234 pp. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-1108-6.

In this meticulously researched book, Jennifer Heller examines, as she says, the “formal and functional features” (196) of a genre seemingly unique to the early modern period: the mother’s legacy. Marking the year 1575 as the one that witnesses the birth of this genre with Frances Abergavenny’s prayers for her daughter (included in Thomas Bentley’s compendium *The Monument of Matrones*),

Heller traces the shape of this literary moment over twenty texts and 100 years, to 1673 and Susanna Bell's *The Legacy of a Dying Mother to Her Mourning Children*. Included in her impressively thorough accounting of the genre are texts that were published in the period, some published only recently as part of the recovery of women's writing from the period, and some that still remain in manuscript. Heller's focus is limited to English texts from the period, though she does briefly mention the fact that the genre crossed the ocean with the Puritans, there being at least three women — Anne Bradstreet, Sarah Goodhue, and Grace Smith — who contributed to the genre from seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century America.

Early in the book, the author claims that genre studies can “lay bare selected dimensions of a culture's ideology” (3). This becomes the organizational logic of the book, which is divided into six chapters, each examining the way mother's legacy texts interact, both generally and individually, with a particular social institution: education, maternity, gender, religion, politics, and death. Certainly, one of the resounding strengths of the book is the clarity of its organization and purpose, as well as the solidity of its textual support system. Within each chapter, section headings and subheadings announce each move in the author's delineation of the genre; every claim the author makes is clearly and meticulously supported. Indeed, the footnotes record a truly vast body of both primary and secondary material.

Yet these obvious and admirable strengths also point, ironically, to the book's most apparent weakness. For all the clarity and particularity with which Heller presents the legacy writers' encounters with early modern institutions, she rarely, if ever, departs from those particulars to reach the spaces of hermeneutic complexity toward which these texts gesture. In a book that announces itself as a literary study, it seems odd never to encounter what we might think of as a literary close reading. And it is not as though the possibilities of this are especially remote. For example, the final chapter, on the gendered experience of death, presents a potentially very interesting exploration of the genre's naming patterns: what are these books actually called — legacies, meditations, blessings — and how do those words matter? Towards the end of this section, there is a discussion of the word *blessing*, which appears on Dorothy Leigh's title page (*The Mothers Blessing*) together with a subtitle containing the words *godly counsaile* and an advertisement that announces the text as “profitable for all parents to leave as a legacy to their children” — both enormously suggestive terms that are picked up, fleetingly, at the conclusion of this section: “The dead mother, then, both arouses the buyer's interest and reassures that buyer of the text's merit. The title page of *The Mothers Blessing* blends the didactic and moral content of the advice book with a multilayered emotional appeal. This strategy was effective, as the popularity of Leigh's text indicates” (185). Like Leigh, Heller arouses our interest with a tantalizingly proximate discussion of the enormously vexed relationship women had to property in the early modern period, a hermeneutic possibility everywhere suggested by the very naming patterns she identifies (and brilliantly investigated by critics such as Wendy Wall, who gets at best a glancing mention in the footnotes). Having done so, though, the discussion

reverts instantly to the level of information. To be sure, the information contained in this book has much to recommend it. Many students of the period will be enormously grateful for the thoroughness and care with which Heller explores the “form and functional features” of the mother’s legacy genre as they work to construct the very readings that are not themselves present in the book. This reviewer, however, found it disappointing not to find more of those readings here.

LISA J. SCHNELL  
University of Vermont