Puritan Scrabble: Games of Grief in Early New England

Think of it as colonial text messaging: quick, cheap print stuck to walls for announcements, advertisements, and popular debate. Broadside poetry was as ubiquitous and unremarkable in early America as smart phones are today. The elegy on Mrs. Lydia Minot (fig. 1) showcases its peculiar appeal: graphic and verbal art work together, much like our modern MMS (multimedia messaging service, now on all major carriers), to transmit both images of her death and puns on her name. The result is a piece of paper that looks like a gravestone—morbid and witty at the same time. Such creations, funeral elegies, were how most Puritans encountered poetry, aside from the Psalms. It was simultaneously the most popular genre of verse in New England, as well as a mechanism of distribution and display. For these reasons, it is worth looking a bit closer at Minot's elegy and at what it tells us about grief and colonial culture.

On the left-hand side of the pictures preceding the poem, we see a bunch of fellows dressed in black following a hearse. On the right stands another hearse, with a shovel and pick handy for digging the grave. Skulls, bones, and winged hourglasses frame a skeleton who urges the reader to "remember DEATH," once in English, once in Latin. The contrast between the elaborately engraved header and the crude woodcuts of an hourglass, coffin, and shovel halfway down the page made me suspect these elements were not created at the same time. Indeed, the top decorations appear in a much more unified design on a 1708 broadside (fig. 2). The banner is, in fact, ready for recycling: it became the most popular decoration for mourning verses in eighteenth-century America, during which Minot's funeral elegy was likely reprinted—some 40 years after her 1667 death.

But why would an elegy on an unknown mother (instead of, say, a famous preacher) be reused after so many years, in such a cobbled-together format? The

poem itself lends some clues, taking three different anagrams of "Lydia Minot"—I di to Al myn'; I di, not my Al; Dai is my Lot—for thematic inspiration. The last stanza even doubles as an acrostic: spelling out the deceased's name from top to bottom. Such intricate wit was common in New England funerary poetry; you'll see that Marsh's elegy also ends on an acrostic. Yet it lends the appearance of an exercise or a game (like Scrabble, if you will) to the elegy, as if the poet is trying to find new meaning in old elements. It is fitting that Minot's broadside should follow this principle both in verse and illustration.

The reprinting and cobbling together of funeral elegies matter because these features show elegies to be more than occasional products or props for grief. Rather, they are reassembled, reread, and remembered as collective aesthetic artifacts. The larger societal significance and persistent use value of these objects become even more pronounced in light of a 1722 article from a Boston newspaper, which claims that there is "not one Country house in fiftie" in New England "which has not its Walls garnished with half a Score of these Sort of Poems … which *praise the Dead to the Life*." Broadsides and manuscript elegies were, apparently, omnipresent as elements of interior decoration. In the absence of visual portraiture, which was eschewed by the Puritans on ideological grounds, the reasons for keeping funeral broadsides may have been genealogical: the lyrical remembrance of ancestors perhaps struck a balance between the heraldic crests found in living rooms across America and the magnetic poetry on the fridge.

Yet, returning to Marsh's and Minot's broadsides, we see that the genealogical analogy fractures as broadsides repeatedly use the exact same textual and visual elements. Ninety-nine anagrams on a wall become an endless, maybe senseless, exercise in repetition and recombination. Skulls and skeletons seem less special and scary if they are always around. The comfort or memory these elegies may have offered is not of a personal but of a collective nature. So what does this kind of macabre, repetitive, communal comfort have to do with early America? How can we integrate this important part of the colonial literary tradition into an understanding that connects it to other expressions, rather than shrugging it off as weirdness? In what ways might conventionality show not a lack of imagination, but a consistent response to the challenges of the New World?

First, it helps to contextualize Minot's broadside within the (somewhat overwrought) culture of mourning in colonial America. Within a few decades of settlement, the colonists had developed a tradition of funeral sermons, lay mourning poems, and an iconography of gravestone carving unique to New England. Yet, in comparison to contemporary Europe, colonial America was hardly an unhealthy place to live. Death rates were much lower for adults living in the American colonies than in Europe, though child and infant mortality remained high, hovering between 10 and 13 percent. Perhaps because death was so common among young people, James Janeway's *Token for Children* (1676), featuring scenes of childhood death and salvation, became one of the colonies' biggest

bestsellers. Manuals on grieving and funeral sermons were particularly popular, with more than 600 copies printed and sold in Massachusetts before 1800. Colonists displayed a daily occupation with death, formulating exact instructions for funerals and even carrying self-elegies around in case they dropped dead in the street, like Anne Bradstreet's father. The Puritans *felt* death, deeply and often, even when there was none.

Considering the omnipresence of imagined death, it is not surprising that elegiac verse—both occasional (written for the funeral) and composed years after the fact—became the most popular literary exercise in New England. The majority of poems dealt with secular and spiritual leaders—their death being the primary occasion for such social expressions of mourning. But elegies were kept, collected, published, and reprinted: Nathaniel Morton's *New-Englands memoriall* (1669), for example, presents colonial history as a series of losses, ending each later chapter with an elegy. In this way, an ostensible administrative account of the flourishing of the colony turns into a litany of loss. Morton's book repeatedly enacts small dramas of succession, which are not satisfactorily resolved. New England thus appears unmoored, without guidance or worship, perpetually mourning its first generation of leaders. Readex's Early American Imprints lists nearly 450 separate elegiac publications before 1800, not counting those that purport to be about something else, like Morton's compendium. In sum, it seems colonists mourned more intensely, expensively, and frequently than their Old World counterparts.

Fig. 1. Upon the Death of the Virtuous and Religious Mrs. Lydia Minot: (The Wife of Mr. John Minot of Dorchester;) the mother of five children, who died in child-bed of the sixth; and together therewith was interred January 27, 1667. Printed by Samuel Green (Cambridge, Mass., 1668). Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Click to enlarge in new window

The habit and practice of mourning poetry was debatable from the start. There is no doubt that elegiac verse was fashionable, but in early New England, it became ubiquitous and democratic, even taking women and children as its subject matter, in contrast to the genre's more formal English roots. People practiced writing elegies in grade school and Anne Bradstreet, for example, composed elegies on Sir Philip Sidney and Du Bartas, even though both were dead more than two decades before her birth. She also, more famously, wrote three small poems on the loss of (three different) granddaughters, verses in which we read a quiet kind of difficulty squaring such daily events with divine will. Her own father was found, upon his sudden death, to have prepared by carrying around a poem on his own demise, similar to Thomas Smith's elegy, which protrudes from the jaws of a skull on his own "Self Portrait" (fig. 3).

If the tropes of time, tears, and bones strike you as staid, you would not be the first: recall Benjamin Franklin's satirical shopping list for writing KITELIC Poetry, named after the Elegy on Mrs. Mehitebell Kitel, which memorably

rhymes “and a sister” with “we have mist her.” As Silence Dogood, Franklin recommends “seasoning” some unfortunate’s demise with

> a Handful or two of Melancholly Expressions, such as Dreadful, Deadly, cruel cold Death, unhappy Fate, weeping Eyes & c- . put them into the empty Scull of some young Harvard [presumably a medical student]- there let them Ferment for the Space of a Fortnight and [add] double Rhymes, such as Power, Flower; Quiver, Shiver; Grieve us, Leave us … & c. you must spread all upon Paper … then … you will have an Excellent Elegy.

Good New England poetry is thus concocted as a verbal witches’ stew, rehashing the same tired old ingredients with a distinctly morbid flavor. Underlying this ironic contemplation of creative energy (as Franklin immediately belies his longing for a muse who “Impatient of the Reins / Pursues an unattempted Course”) is a charge of emotional dishonesty. Puritan mourning verse is funny because it is too formulaic to be heartfelt. The lowly nature of its subject matter—the family ties of ordinary New Englanders—leaves few other options than the recitation of clichés.

Fig. 2. “Carmen Miserabile—A Solemn Lacrymatory for the Grave of Jonathan Marsh…,” broadside, Cambridge, 1708. Courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum, Boston, Massachusetts. Click to enlarge in new window

But the tradition persisted. Phillis Wheatley initially gained fame with her funeral verse on George Whitefield (fig. 4), followed by lesser-known broadside elegies on Mr. Leonard (1771), Mrs. Pitkin (1772), and the Rev. Mr. John Moorhead (1773). Wheatley manages to combine the requirements of the genre with skillful requests for patronage and self-advertising. More than a hundred years later, Huck Finn stands amazed at the deathly imaginations of the young Miss Emmeline Grangerford,

> who kept a scrapbook … and used to paste obituaries and examples of patient suffering … and write poetry after them … Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand with her “tribute” before he was cold … Everyone was sorry she died, because she had laid out a lot more of these pictures to do … but I reckoned, with her disposition, she was having a better time in the graveyard.

The Anglo-American penchant for the sentimental dwelling on death, including the pilgrimages to the real New York grave of the fictional Charlotte Temple, is (at least in part) the target of Twain’s parody here. Still, Emmeline’s

speed of composition is suspect, and the simplicity of mourning verse becomes, literally, child’s play. It is worth noting that elegy was not a tradition for women to do and men to mock, as these examples seem to suggest. Most poems appeared on the deaths of preachers, teachers, and soldiers, with those who served the greater good apparently deemed most worthy of communal remembrance.

Fig. 3. Self Portrait, Thomas Smith, oil on canvas, 24 3/4 x 23 3/4 inches (ca. 1680). Courtesy of the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Image © The Worcester Art Museum.

Even though most of the poems memorialize the first generation of leaders in New England, these men were themselves unfamiliar with elaborate mourning rituals. No elegies or funeral sermons survive from the first decades of settlement. Instead, colonial funerals were initially performed in the resolutely anti-liturgical tradition befitting principled Puritanism. English Separatists excluded all reading, music, and even ministers themselves from the funeral, so that there might be no praying or preaching over the dead. These politicized burial practices prompted impassioned responses, including one from a Catholic convert, who wrote: “The Burialls now among the Reformed in England [in the 1640s], are in a manner profane, in many places the dead being throwne into the ground like dogs, and not a word said.” In America, things began in similar silence, according to Thomas Lechford’s *Plain Dealing* (1642): “At Burials, nothing is read, nor any Funeral Sermon made, but all the neighborhood, or a good company of them, come together by the tolling of the bell, and carry the dead solemnly to his grave, and there stand by him while he is buried.”

This funerary culture changed rapidly, allowing for sermons, poetry, and public sadness. John Cotton gave the first colonial funeral sermon in 1646, and in that same decade John Wilson and John Fiske started writing anagrammatical elegies, scrambling the names of the deceased into verse. Gravestone art began, tentatively, in 1653. There was also a marked shift toward displays of personal grief—initially eschewed because the transition of the deceased to heaven was supposedly a happy one. But people wept openly now. Take John Eliot at his wife’s funeral in 1687, in the words of Cotton Mather: “and when at last she died, I heard and saw her aged husband, who else very rarely wept, yet now with tears over the coffin, before the good people, a vast confluence of which were come to her funeral, say: ‘Here lies my dear, faithful, pious, prudent, prayerful wife; I shall go to her, and she not return to me.'” Eliot’s anguished note of finality—”she not return to me”—belies any happy acceptance of separation from his wife and seems, instead, to echo Orpheus’ age-old cry over Eurydice: he wants her back.

Fig. 4. Half title from An elegiac poem, on the death of that celebrated divine, and eminent servant of Jesus Christ, the late reverend, and learned George Whitefield…, by Phillis Wheatley (Boston, 1770). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

New Englanders incorporated poetry into multiple mourning behaviors: verses were pinned to the hearse, read aloud at the graveside, distributed in manuscript or print, engraved on the headstone, and taken home as a memorial. In their heyday, elegies were produced in vast quantities—so much so, that Cotton Mather likened the large number of poems pinned to Nathanael Collins's hearse to "a Paper winding sheet to lay him out." Poetry was a measure of tribute to the dead, and the keeping and copying of it encouraged appropriate remembrance. In some ways, it was just one category of objects among an emerging cottage industry in memorabilia, which also included gloves and rings. Gloves and rings were sent as invitations to and reminders of important funerals; as such, they became significant status symbols. Samuel Sewell, for example, recorded receiving fifty-seven mourning rings between 1687 and 1725, while Doctor Samuel Buxton of Salem left his heirs a quart tankard full in 1758. Rings were usually engraved with skulls or skeletons, as well as the date of death (fig. 5).

The contents and appearance of poetry were much more personal than the stock skeleton rings of course, especially in anagrammatical lyrics, which circulated in both print and manuscript. Some poems may have even been written down after oral performances at the graveside. In the personal notebook he kept from 1712 to 1723, John Thompson admitted he found "a soule satisfying delight" in reading the anagrams and acrostics he collected and composed, "pondering & writeing and remembering afresh my Dear father and his Contemporaries with him." His delight is evident in the 5 consecutive anagrams and epitaphs on his father, William Thompson, written down 56 years after the actual death: "transcribed March 2, 1723, upon the Death of my Dear honoured father, Mr. William Tompson, pastor of the Church of Christ in Braintry, Decemb. 10, 1666."

5. "Mourning Ring." On the inside of this ring is the engraved inscription "In mem. I.W. Arch.Roch.obt11 June 79" ("in memory of I.W. Archdeacon of Rochester, died on 11 June 1679") John Lee Warner was archdeacon of Rochester from 1660 to 1679. Courtesy of the British Museum, London.

A peculiar kind of comfort seems to inhere in the continual shuffling and combining of letters. The activity was at once creative and preservative. Its very emphasis on the building blocks of language seems to run counter to death's destruction and decay. The visual similarity of elegies and gravestones strengthens the tension between the perishable corpse of the deceased and its permanent keeping in letter or words. Literary historian Max Cavitch has observed that elegies with word games "bring mortuary inscription inside" people's homes while also preserving a sense of the verses' "material nature,

its connection with history's remains: the relics, corpses, monuments, and effigies that history leaves behind." The elegies that look like gravemarkers are thus both temporary props and permanent tokens: simultaneously fragile like paper and solid as stone. Despite their contemporary popularity, these language games are rarely included in modern anthologies. The funereal verse now seems unfashionable or even funny—going by Franklin and Twain. The poems are also, admittedly, difficult to interpret within a larger Reformation or specifically colonial tradition.

Anagrams and acrostics were popular devotional exercises in the Middle Ages, allowing believers to discover new meaning in saints' names and their permutations. The genre was disparaged, however, during the Renaissance. George Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) casts it as a kind of occupational therapy: "a thing if it be done for pastime and exercise of wit without superstition is commendable inough … neither bringing [the author] any great gayne not any great losse, unless it be of idle time." The only major Protestant poet in England who scrambles letters to make meaning is George Herbert, writing pattern poetry in carmen figurations (such as his famous "Easter Wings), echo-verse (in "Heaven"), and a single anagram ("MARY/ARMY"). Herbert's poetry was frequently read in colonial New England. Still, it seems unlikely that he single-handedly set the tone for what was to become such a pervasive poetic habit.

6. "No Cross, No Crown," taken from p. 31 in Notebooks, 1666-1725 vol. I by Benjamin Franklin, often referred to as Benjamin Franklin "the Elder" (1650-1727). Courtesy of the Manuscript Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Ideologically, playing on or with letters was a way for Puritan poets to deny artistic agency or individual wit. What Puttenham dismisses as "superstition" was precisely the attraction of the form in New England. At the heart of this conflict lies a differing view of language and signification: personal names, to Puritans, are not randomly selected, but part of a divine code. Whereas Puttenham believes spelling and scrambling create arbitrary combinations that are neither true nor false, the colonists think anagrams and acrostics reveal hidden aspects of a higher reality. These kinds of expressions, whereby poetic invention is not primarily figurative or formal, but rather typographical, were suited to the settlers' fallen natures and available to human sense. Such representative strategy may have become so popular at the specific site of mourning because it, like the phenomenon of death, bridges earth and heaven: putting forth a kind of knowledge that is universally true.

Perhaps this transcendent quality makes up for the notable lack of emotional progress in New England elegies. The three main psychological functions of the funeral elegy in early modern England were to praise the deceased, lament his or her death, and console the bereaved. Poetic lamentation was supposed to be

comforting, restorative, and, according to Puttenham “a medicine [and a] cure,” which allowed the poet “to play also the Phisitian.” Yet it is this movement—a verbal mirroring or mimicking of the emotional processes of mourning—that colonial elegies do not possess. At times, they assign blame to congregants or backsliding children in a move that mimics the Puritan jeremiad. Or they seem to get stuck in staid tropes (weeping eyes and doleful cries) that do not overtly offer consolation aside from a communal sharing of sorrow.

It helps to return to John Thompson’s “soule satisfying delight” in anagrams, which suggests that linguistic play has taken on the psychological movement that is thematically absent from these elegies. The composition and interpretation of word games offers some basic kind of solace in that it is useful and generates new knowledge or information about the deceased. Scrabble conserves and protects because it acknowledges change while accounting for each letter and sound; it provides a model of transfiguration that ensures completion and ongoing meaning. In this way, colonial funeral elegies provide a compelling combination of individual transcendence and comforting materiality.

One last, lovely example illustrates this appeal: the manuscript notebooks of Benjamin Franklin’s eponymous uncle (1650-1727). Commonly known as Benjamin Franklin the Elder, he left behind two impeccably neat octavo volumes, of which the first one features 230 numbered and indexed (!) pages of rhymed language play. The highest degree of word play is reserved for elegies on his predeceased daughter, himself, and especially his wife (figs. 6 and 7). Franklin carefully organized his compositions by date, creating the illusion of a journal, while the perfect paper-saving spacing of the poems, as well as the consistency of the handwriting and Scriptural annotations (visible as minute scribbles at the start of the fourth stanza in fig. 7) make it more likely that he prepared this notebook from other drafts at one particular time. In addition to the two volumes currently at the American Antiquarian Society, there is a further commonplace book and a “Short Account” of his life, held by Yale’s Beinecke Library.

Franklin in his natural, chronological organization makes some tell-tale mistakes: for example, the highly wrought shape poem “No Cross, No Crown” claims to be based on his wife’s name, Hannah Franklin, more than 5 years before the couple married in late 1683. So on September 14, 1678, Hannah’s name was not yet Franklin, but Welles. She was, as Franklin himself notes: “Daughter of Mr Samuel Welles minister of Banbury in Oxfordshire”—a famous dissenter and thus a notable name—”this Mr W. was one of those 2000 that were turned out soon after King Charles 2d restoration, on 24 Aug 1662, commonly called Black Bartholomew day.” This detail matters because it shows that Franklin not only copied, but also wrote many of these poems much later than their given dates: towards the end of his life, after he had emigrated to America. These poems are therefore not the occasional artifacts they purport to be, but ongoing aesthetic exercises in consolation.

Franklin’s constant restatements of his wife’s name (even when he gets it

wrong, historically) allow him to invoke and address her. It is as if by repeating Hannah’s name, her husband conjures her presence after he has, in his own words, “Lost the delight of mine Eyes, the desire of my heart, and the comfort of my life.” Spelling out HANNAH makes concrete, tangible, and alive that which is forever inaccessible. In this way, colonial elegies are not just props or sanctioned poems; they are material prayers, found their way into the spiritual world, while still clothed in flesh.

So far, I have explored the ideological and aesthetic reasons for the Puritan penchant for language games. We now know *how* the Puritans mourned, but explaining *why* they grieved so often and (it seems) disproportionately is harder. Elegies dramatize rituals of succession, which were often fraught in New England due to the perpetually disappointing nature of its young people. David Stannard has put forth the idea of “a profound sense of tribal vulnerability” contingent upon immigration. Perhaps the unfamiliar American surroundings and scary new neighbors conditioned these hyper-literate responses, which might be best read as attempts at differentiation from Native rituals of grief.

The European settlers of New England immediately noticed the ravages of epidemic disease that had spread down the coast from (probably) Nova Scotia, where Englishmen came to fish. William Bradford describes the Native people as “being dead and abundantly wasted … the skulls and bones were found in many places lying still above the ground.” Thomas Morton, in a rare instance of agreement with the Puritans, dubbed early seventeenth-century New England “a new found Golgotha,” meaning “a place of a skull.” It is unknown whether Native death still so visibly marked the landscape at the founding of Massachusetts Bay a decade later. But even then, ethnographers remained focused on Indian habits of grief, which were uniformly found to be primitive and extravagant.

In *New England’s Prospect* (1634)—meant to attract the interest of travelers and new colonists alike—William Wood writes:

> the date of their life expired … all hope of recovery being past, then to behold and hear their throbbing sobs and deep-fetched sighs, their grief-wrung hands and tear-bedewed cheeks, their doleful cries … The glut of their grief being past, they commit the corpses of their deceased friends to the ground, over whose grave is for a long time spent many a briny tear, deep groan, and Irish-like howlings, continuing annual mournings with a black, stiff paint on their faces. These are mourners without hope.

This passage features a deep sense of cultural alienation from Native sorrow, which is seen as a set of hyper-corporealized performances rather than as an emotional or interior state of being. The focus on Indian physiques—”deep-fetched sighs, grief-wrung hands and tear-bedewed cheeks”—shows the author’s attention to such outward markers of inward change as being perhaps more

reliable than verbal utterances. Although Wood acknowledges the careful temporal spacing (“annual mournings”) of Native ceremonies of remembrance, he also distinguishes their grief from the Christian expectation of an afterlife: “these are mourners without hope.”

Roger Williams’s *Key into the Languages of America* (1643) includes more detailed and sensitive observations on Native mourning practices: “Bewailing is very solemn amongst them morning and evening and sometimes in the night they bewail their lost husbands, wives, children, brethren or sisters &c. Sometimes a quarter, halfe, yea, a whole yeere, and longer, if it be for a great Prince.” Although the action here is even more temporally structured than in Wood’s description, Indian mourning remains exclusively non-verbal. This is important because the close-range observations of Wood and Williams are, of course, rare. Most settlers would have heard nightly Native howls, shrieks, and cries coming from the woods without any idea of their calendrical significance or cultural context.

Consequently, colonists were absolutely terrified of such expressions. Because the sounds were (thought to be) below or beyond language, they came—especially during and after King Philip’s War—to be coded as animalistic, brutal, and savage. In his epic poem on the war, Benjamin Tompson notes the “hideous Indian cry,” while May Rowlandson describes her captors as “a company of hell hounds, roaring, singing, ranting … as if they would have torn our very hearts out” with faces “as black as the devil.” Although Indians may have sung or wailed on various occasions—at powwows, while going to war, or in grief—my point here is that these instances were, in white minds, collapsed into a single, typical behavior: that of the Indian who cannot properly feel or speak, and therefore simply howls.

The final element that defined Native grief for the colonists was the tradition of giving grave goods, including wampum, furs, and weapons. The first account of settlement in New England (an anonymous *Relation* from 1622) mentions “sumptuous” Indian graves and items that can there be “found” or stolen. Roger Williams also relates an instance of large-scale property destruction due to Indian grief:

> after the dead is laid in Grave, and sometimes (in some parts) some goods cast in with them. They have then a second great Lamentation … the chiefe and most aged peacable Father of the Countrey, *Caunoúnicus*, having buried his sonne, he burn’d his own Palace, and all his goods in it, (amongst them to a great value) in solemne remembrance of his sonne.

These “excessive Sorrowes” second Wood’s suggestion of “the glut of [Indian] grief”: that there is something unseemly and profligate about Native mourning. Historian Erik R. Seeman points out that Canonicus likely burned goods of “great value” that he had first bought at Williams’s trading post. You might

wonder whether the Christian understanding of sacrifice—whereby one good is relinquished to gain another—inflects these descriptions of ritual burning, but no such fellowship was extended to the Indians.

The ritual burning or burying of precious commodities seemed, to the Puritans, not just silly, but intrinsically savage, which led Puritan missionaries to spend a great deal of effort trying to root out this tradition among their converts, to no apparent effect. In the Praying Towns of Massachusetts, the ministers happily observe "here were no black faces for it as the manner of the Indians is, nor goods buried with it, nor hellish howlings over the dead." Yet despite these assertions, archaeological evidence shows that the number of burial goods in Native graves increased strongly in the seventeenth century. Even in the Praying Town of Natick, graves of converted owners, which were moved in the eighteenth century, included wampum and glass beads (both valuable currency), metal spoons and a glass bottle. These findings convincingly show Native resistance in the face of missionary surveillance, and, more importantly, they prove that mourning itself became an intercultural battleground in colonial America.

Read as a cultural response to the perceived nonverbal and destructive qualities of Indian grief, the Puritan elegy starts to make more sense, both in its characteristic hyper-literacy, revealed in language games like anagrams and acrostics, and in its emphasis on materiality, evinced in a representative focus on bones and graves. The coming together of both those concerns, in which words become concrete material to be molded or woven together, creates monuments that simultaneously assert timelessness and specific sorrow. Preaching or praying at the graveside saves the Puritans from charges of inhumanity (silently burying bones "like dogs"), while no music (aside from the church bells) prevents an association with savage ("Irish-like") howling. Like rings and gloves, poems inspire a collectors' impulse: verbal and visual collages postpone the final farewell, as well as becoming an accepted sign of civilization and sophistication in early New England.

7. "Lamentations 4 Nov. 1705," taken from page 138 of Notebooks, 1666-1725 vol. I by Benjamin Franklin, often referred to as Benjamin Franklin "the Elder" (1650-1727). Courtesy of the Manuscript Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Indian influence on immigrant cultures in colonial America is rarely acknowledged. Although the Puritans may have settled on a hill, they hardly functioned in a vacuum. The effects of displacement and intercultural encounter come to permeate performances, habits of mind, and strategies of representation in early America. It is worth remembering that these gestures are not necessarily or even deliberately antagonistic towards Native Americans, but rather that they result from a collective search for comfort and solace in difficult times. Consequently, though the characterization of verbal ingenuity

as a game (of grief) may seem flippant, it does conjure the communal endeavor to newly interpret everyday elements. The true nature of a New England elegy is perhaps a cross between Silence Dogood's cookery and an overdetermined ouija board: the pungency of its clichés should not deter us from finding new meaning.

Further reading:

The vast quantity of Puritan elegies has fortunately led to many considerations of the specific genre, among which recent explorations by Matthew P. Brown—*The Pilgrim and the Bee* (Philadelphia, 2007)—and Max Cavitch, *American Elegy* (Minneapolis, 2007) prove valuable additions to older readings by Jeffrey A. Hammond, *The American Puritan Elegy* (Cambridge, 2000) and Ivy Schweitzer, *The Work of Self-Representation* (UNC for Omohundro, 1991). Aside from his book, Cavitch adds an important voice to Puritan "death studies" in his 2002 article on Thomas Smith's Self-Portrait in *Early American Literature* 37:1.

The field of "death studies" has been defined by Eric R. Seeman (see his *Death in the New World* [Philadelphia, 2010]) and was practiced *avant la lettre* by Gordon E. Geddes in *Welcome Joy* (Ann Arbor, 1981) and David E. Stannard in *The Puritan Way of Death* (Oxford, 1977).

For multi-disciplinary approaches, one might productively turn to David H. Watters in '*With Bodilie Eyes*' (Ann Arbor, 1981), Maris A. Vinovskis, "Angels' Heads and Weeping Willows: Death in Early America,"*Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 86:2 (1977), and the standard work by Allen Ludwig, *Graven Images: New England Stone Carving and its Symbols* (Lebanon, N.H., 1999).

There are multiple online databases devoted to New England mourning culture; the best ones include thePlymouth Colony Archive Project; the "death" section of the Reed Digital Collections Native Converts Collection); and an earlier Common-place contribution on how to teach high school students about death in New England, "Tiptoeing through the Tombstones" by Dean Eastman 2:2 (2002).

This article originally appeared in issue 11.4 (July, 2011).

Joanne van der Woude is assistant professor in the English Department and the Program in History and Literature at Harvard. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *Early American Literature*, *A New Literary History of America* (2009), and *American Quarterly*. She has finished her first book *Becoming Colonial: Indians, Immigrants, and Early American Aesthetics* and is currently researching her second book project, on Indians and epic heroism in early New World writings.