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Romance, Revolution & Reform

Power, Agency and Emotion in the Folklore of the English Rural Deathbed

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ABSTRACT: The deathbed is an emotionally fraught site where friends and family gather to say farewell to their loved one for the final time. In the English rural working-class home in the nineteenth century folkloric ritual provided culturally-constructed behaviours with which to emotionally navigate this moment. At the urban deathbed paid professionals took the roles formerly held by friends and family to nurse and prepare a loved one for death and burial, while the rural deathbed remained a more traditional space. Building on Monique Scheer's theory of emotions as practice, I argue that in the rural working-class home folkloric ritual became bodily-expressed emotions. These rituals, which can be viewed as a method of social communication, offered a framework for emotional responses to death which allowed those gathered at the deathbed to feel some power and agency over the moment and manner of their loved one's passing.

KEYWORDS: Folklore; Death; Rural History; Ritual; Emotion

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES the folklore of the English rural deathbed in the nineteenth century to consider how the rituals of the deathbed aided the expression and sharing of emotion and prompted feelings of power and agency among practitioners. The English deathbed underwent a transformation over the course of the nineteenth century causing a divergence between deathbed practices in urban and rural locations. In cities, the professionalisation of doctors, the increasing medicalisation of death, the impact of public health reforms on attitudes toward the dead body, and the boom in undertakers all served to disrupt traditional family behaviours around death as the roles formerly held by friends and family in nursing the sick and preparing the dead body for burial were taken by paid professionals. Meanwhile in rural locations, where the pace of technological, societal, and cultural change was significantly slower and the pressures of crowded, urban living were not felt, the deathbed remained a more traditional space.

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Families and friends continued to play the roles that their parents had before them, enacting traditional folkloric rituals at the deathbed that were understood by the gathered family as acts of care, forming a framework of familiar customs and expected behaviours with which to navigate an emotionally difficult period. Using evidence from nineteenth-century folklore collections, published in both book and article form towards the end of the nineteenth century, I examine the folkloric rituals of the English rural working-class deathbed. I consider the emotional role of folklore in these contexts and argue that inherited traditions encouraged feelings of power and agency in those who performed them. Through this analysis of rural working-class death customs I show that social changes around the deathbed in nineteenth-century England, especially in respect to the involvement of the family of the deceased, reveal a diversity of behaviours and beliefs that challenge the totalising stereotypes of dying and grieving largely gleaned from urban settings. Furthermore, this analysis indicates that the cultural persistence of deathbed traditions remained meaningful for much longer than we might suppose or understand from the emphasis placed on the study of the urban record of this period.

The influence of religion on determining deathbed conduct has long been held as fundamental. However, evidence from folklore collections suggests that folkloric rituals played a greater and more persistent role for rural working-class families in shaping how they behaved at the deathbed and what rituals were deemed necessary during this period of liminality. The deathbed has often been portrayed as a universalising location in which every family experiences the same set of emotions, and yet during the nineteenth century paid professionals at the urban deathbed increasingly intruded into what had previously been a family gathering, in a move which Allan Kellehear has termed the 'well-managed' death.[1] This effectively transformed the urban family into onlookers rather than active participants in the rituals of the deathbed. Historians have tended to foreground the family's feelings of powerlessness in these

[1] Allan Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7. See also Pat Jalland, 'Victorian Death and Its Decline 1850–1918', in *Death in England: An Illustrated History*, ed. by Peter Jupp and Clare Gittings (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 230-256 (p. 234); Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, 1 (1983), 109-131 (p. 115); Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 72.

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settings, but I argue that these experiences were largely confined to urban areas. In rural locations, the persistence of folkloric custom offered practitioners a greater sense of control during the dying and grieving process.

The emotions experienced by the family at the deathbed are not explicit in the folkloric record which was curated by middle- and upper-class folklorists who tended to record superstitions and beliefs while neglecting to question the practitioners about the meaning or purpose of their rituals. Furthermore, an individual's feelings of grief are difficult to separate from a culturally-mandated response. But, as Monique Scheer argues, 'emotional practices are habits, rituals, and everyday pastimes that aid us in achieving a certain emotional state. This includes the striving for a desired feeling as well as the modifying of one that is not desirable'.[2] Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, in which the body is a 'mindful entity' that can store previous experiences as 'habituated, practical processes', Scheer contends that outward, bodily-expressed emotions can be seen as a method of social communication.[3] In a group context the practice of emotion is regulated by the group itself: 'The emotional style of a group is engrained in an individual through both tacit socialization and explicit instruction'.[4] Giulia Morosini has contextualised this idea of the group regulation of emotion and how it can be 'mobilised' for a wider purpose in her work on the Italian renaissance military. She uses the example of the injured bodies of military captains, which were often displayed to their troops as a way to invoke feelings of love and loyalty, and to create strong social bonds.[5] A deathbed could be viewed as a similar opportunity to practice emotion through folkloric ritual —the embodied actions evoke emotion in those practising the ritual and in those observing — with the emotional practice serving to regularise feeling and to inspire a tighter bond in that moment. These emotions, 'simultaneously spontaneous and conventional', are often performed as a learned habit and as such can be viewed as cultural practices which are passed

[2] Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), 193–220 (p. 209).
[3] Scheer, p. 195.
[4] Giulia Morosini, 'Mobilizing emotions in the Italian Renaissance military', in Kate Davison et al., 'Emotions as a kind of practice: Six case studies utilizing Monique Scheer's practice-based approach to emotions in history', *Cultural History*, 7.2 (2018), 226–238 (p. 227).
[5] Morosini, p. 230.

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down through the generations.[6] Deathbed folklore falls into this category, providing traditional actions which allow the ordered expression of feeling, enabling the family to easily decode meaning and take comfort from experiencing an emotion collectively. As Pat Jalland has explored in the context of nineteenth-century upper-class rituals of mourning, these rituals can help to manage emotions: 'Nineteenth-century mourning rituals met the psychological needs of the bereaved by reducing the terrifying aspects of death, and structuring the grieving process within a coherent set of customs'.[7] In this way, folklore offered a framework for emotional responses to death; by providing a ritual to perform for each step of the dying process, from last breath to final farewell, the expression of complex feelings could be ordered and embodied in socially acceptable rituals.

It can be difficult to access the voices of the rural working classes, not least their emotional responses, as very few recorded their feelings in print. However, folklore represents a source of alternative knowledge outside the establishment, reflecting popular beliefs and providing insight into the diverse and often distinctly regional customs that were practised by the rural working classes. Viewing folkloric ritual as a form of emotional practice allows for important if partial insight into the emotions of the rural deathbed. The sources in this study were collected by folklorists from rural working-class people and published in book and article form from the late 1860s. The practice of folklore was not confined solely to rural communities; folklore flowed between urban and rural locations as people migrated from the countryside to the cities, often adapting their customs to new circumstances. Despite this fluidity, folklorists in the mid- to late nineteenth century held a rigid and narrow definition of folklore and the people who practised it, informed by a Romantic nationalist agenda that saw folklore as a 'survival' of primitive thought.[8] This definition held that folklore originated with, and continued to be practised by, the rural working classes who were deemed to be more attuned to nature, providing a counterpoint to the degenerate, uncultured,

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[6] Scheer, p. 206.

[7] Pat Jalland, 'Death, Grief, and Mourning in the Upper-Class Family 1860–1914' in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, ed. by Ralph Houlbrooke (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 171–187 (p. 180).

[8] On Romantic nationalism and folklore see: Roger D. Abrahams, 'Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 106.419 (1993), 3-37; Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin, eds., *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

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urban working classes.[9] In reality, many of the deathbed traditions I will go on to describe would have also been practised in urban settings by the working classes who had recently moved to the city, but for the purposes of this study I retain the folklorist's definition of 'the folk' as rural. Furthermore, the folklore collections published at the end of the nineteenth century were made up of a mixture of sources reprinted from earlier antiquarian collections, with reminiscences of early nineteenth-century customs placed alongside contemporary reports of current folkloric practices. This builds up a picture of folklore as not only an important set of inherited cultural beliefs but also demonstrates how folklore was adapted and evolved to suit the changing circumstances of those who practised it. Although great social, cultural, and demographic changes occurred over the period of the nineteenth century, the folklore record implies that such was the cultural importance of folkloric tradition that it persisted, forming a foundational aspect of deathbed behaviour that transcended religious and societal transformations.

A Reconceptualisation of the Relationship with the Newly-dead

The ideal, traditional English deathbed, which was first conceptualised in the Middle Ages, offered a chance for the dying to prepare themselves for the next life, to say farewell to their loved ones and, all being well, fade into 'sleep'. Friends and family traditionally congregated at the deathbed and a final visit to a loved one before their demise became a cultural obligation. In pre-Reformation England this gathering had a strongly religious focus as the dying needed to be absolved of their sins and the family had to pray for their departing soul. Once the concept of purgatory had been expunged from English life this moment lost its ritual significance: in this section of the essay, I ask what filled the lacuna.

The Reformation stripped the deathbed of a variety of religious rituals that had previously formed the focal point of a deathbed gathering, leading to a reconceptualisation of the relationship to the newly-dead. Paul Binski describes the significance of the religious rituals of the pre-Reformation deathbed and explains that medieval Christians feared a sudden death because it would not allow them time to settle their affairs, preventing them from being fully absolved from sin and entering the desired state of grace: 'The happy man died in bed in a domesticated and regulated

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[9] Gillian Bennett, 'Folklore Studies and the English Rural Myth', *Rural History*, 4.1 (1993), 77–91 (p. 82).

fashion'.[10] Peter Marshall notes that it was believed the dead did not immediately pass to the afterlife but instead had to move through a 'painful purgation of the debt due for their sins' in purgatory. This, he argues, led to a second key belief that the living could intercede on behalf of the dead to assist them in their journey.[11] The dead continued to exist for the pre-Reformation family; they must be prayed for and commemorated to ensure that they successfully passed through purgatory. This was a process that started at the deathbed but persisted after burial, ensuring the dead continued to have a presence long after their body had been committed to the ground. After the Reformation death rituals became less religious in focus, and increasingly centred on the living.[12] Vanessa Harding contends that this shift caused a dramatic reordering of our relationship with the dead:

> Protestant doctrine condemned the idea of intercession for the dead and brought to an end the elaborate structure of chantries, obits, and commemorative practices. The departed soul could neither benefit from nor confer benefits on the living; the dead ceased to exist as a meaningful human category.[13]

This was certainly the Church's official line and great efforts were made to stamp out any lingering Popish rituals associated with death. However, tradition and belief are not easily surrendered, especially when they relate to the ultimate destination of the soul; safe delivery to heaven, everlasting rest, or potential resurrection had long been the ideal. Many historians argue for a 'long' or 'slow' Reformation and, as Marshall explains, it is around our relationship to the dead that the slow pace of cultural change can be seen most distinctly, with few willing to risk any changes to traditional deathbed rituals

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[10] Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 36.

[11] Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 7.

[12] See R. C. Finucane, 'Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion: Social Ideals and Death Rituals in the Later Middle Ages' in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. by Joachim Whaley (London: Europa Publications Ltd, 1981), pp. 40–60 (p. 40).

[13] Vanessa Harding, 'Research Priorities: a historian's perspective' in *Grave Concerns: Death and Burial in England 1700–1850*, ed. by Margaret Cox (York: Council for British Archaeology, 1998), pp. 205-212 (p. 209).

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lest they impact the future repose of the deceased's soul.[14] As I will go on to show, the 'official' Church position that the living no longer had to intercede on behalf of the dead was not necessarily reflected in the practice of folkloric rituals of the deathbed. These rituals, still an active and evolving part of nineteenth-century rural working-class death culture, provided plenty of scope for the living to feel some power and agency over the fate of their loved one's spirit and offered a way to practice emotion through embodied actions.

The Folklore of the Deathbed

Rural working-class deathbeds did not go through the same transformations as urban deathbeds in the nineteenth century. A doctor was unlikely to attend at the moment of death, hospitals were too costly and distant for remote rural people, and the sanitary concerns of crowded cities did not translate to their rural neighbours. This meant that the rural working-class deathbed was less troubled by modernity; the same traditions and rituals performed by previous generations could continue to be enacted. I am not arguing that there was a single rural culture of death or that it was immune to outside influences. Through the huge variety of regional folklore collected, I want to show rather that nineteenth-century rural death culture was vibrant, diverse, and infused with meaning – folkloric ritual provided a series of familiar embodied actions which helped the family to navigate a personal, emotionally-fraught moment.

The urban deathbed in the nineteenth century exemplifies Harding's statement that in the aftermath of the Reformation, which saw the removal of the concept of purgatory, the dead were no longer a 'meaningful human category': they no longer existed past the point of death. At the urban deathbed, farewells were made until the moment of death, but once the loved one had passed the emphasis moved back onto the family whose rituals then revolved around mourning.[15] However, for the rural working classes the question of the destination of a loved one's spirit and the family's ability to intercede to ensure its onward journey remained pertinent. The folklorist Rev. T. F. Thiselton writes in *Domestic Folk-Lore* (1881):

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[14] Marshall, p. 310.

[15] Strange, p. 16.

> The superstitions associated with the last stage of human life are most numerous; and that this should be so is not surprising when it is considered how, from the earliest time, a certain dread has been attached to death, not only on account of its awful mysteriousness, but owing to its being the crisis of an entirely new phase of the soul's existence.[16]

Thiselton acknowledges the importance of deathbed rituals and their relationship to the soul's liminal status during this period. However, in keeping with the paternalistic attitude of the folklorists towards the rural working classes, he seems more preoccupied with larger philosophical concerns about the 'awful mysteriousness' of death than the emotional experiences of those who performed these final rituals. Dread of death may have been common to all classes, but folkloric ritual also provided the rural working classes with an opportunity to feel powerful at the deathbed. Their behaviours could seem to impact the time of death and the ease with which their loved one moved on to the afterlife, reflecting their ongoing belief in a lingering spirit and the need to actively assist in its onward journey.

The folklore of the deathbed begins before death has taken place with the deep emotional ties held between family members, thought to 'hold back' an individual from death. Folklorist Richard Blakeborough describes the belief in 1898:

> Few country people doubt the existence of a power by which the living can (as they put it) hold back the dying. It is not an uncommon thing to hear some one say, "Sha wad 'a'e deed last neet, nobbut Mary wadn't let her gan," or "Mary wadn't gi'e her up," or "Mary ho'ds on tiv her seea."
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> It is, as it were, the last link of the chain connecting life with the earthly side of eternity, the snapping of which would for ever free the soul, but which the dying person is unable to break, because some one refuses to be reconciled; they cannot bear to part with them, and in this way hold them back.[17]

This concept was known variously as 'holding back', 'longing' or 'wishing' and it was believed that the living had the power to prevent their loved one from dying, simply by

[16] Rev T. F. Thiselton, *Domestic Folk-Lore*, (London: Cassell, 1881), p. 48.

[17] Richard Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire* (London: Henry Frowde, 1898), p. 120.

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'wishing' them to stay too much.[18] Other circumstances were said to account for difficulty in dying, the most widespread was a belief that the presence of pigeon or game feathers in the deathbed could prevent an easy death. This is one of the more prevalent folkloric beliefs connected with the deathbed and is cited in folklore from all across England: Cornwall, Dorset, Oxfordshire, Sussex, Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Cheshire.[19] Again this folklore provides an active solution for the family in the face of the terrible power wielded by mortality: they can remove the feather pillow (or the dying person from their bed) and in this way feel like they are easing a difficult death. Feathers were not the only objects thought to prevent an easy death: crossbeams were also believed to 'hinder' passing.[20] It was recommended that anyone who was lingering on the point of death be moved in case their bed lay underneath crossbeams. These large wooden beams were important structural aspects of the home, supporting the walls and roof. The belief that lying underneath one could somehow cause a blockage to the departing spirit is an example of the house itself forming a barrier between the dying person and the afterlife.

The belief that the onward flight of a person's spirit might be distracted or prevented by a loud noise, a closed window or a locked door, echoes the concept of the material house as a barricade.[21] Blakeborough conjures up a powerful vision of this

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[18] Charlotte Latham, 'Some West Sussex Superstitions Still Lingering in 1868', *The Folklore Record,* vol. 1 (1878), p. 60; Rev M. C. F. Morris, *Yorkshire Folk-Talk* (London: Henry Frowde, 1892), p. 238; Rev T. F Thiselton, *English Folklore* (London: Hardwicke & Bogue, 1878), p. 229.

[19] Latham, p. 59; M. A. Courtney, 'Cornish Folk-lore', The Folklore Society, *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. 5 (1887), p. 217; *Folk-Lore*, vol. 23 (1912), p. 356; *Folk-Lore*, vol. 24 (1913), p. 88; Sidney Oldall Addy, *Household Tales with other Traditional Remains Collected in the Counties of York, Lincoln, Derby, and Nottingham* (London: D. Nutt, 1895), p. 123; Blakeborough, p. 120; Morris, p. 238; Thiselton, *Domestic Folk-Lore*, pp. 58–59; Mrs Gutch and Mabel Peacock, *County Folklore: Examples of Printed Folklore Concerning Lincolnshire* (London: The Folklore Society, 1908), p. 240; *Choice Notes from Notes & Queries*. *Folklore* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1859), p. 43; William Henderson, *Notes of the Folk-lore of the Northern Counties of England* (London: The Folklore Society, 1879), p. 60; Robert Hunt, *Popular romances of the west of England* (London: J.C. Hotten, 1865), p. 379.

[20] The Folklore Society, *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. 1 (1883), p. 196; *Choice Notes from Notes & Queries*, pp. 175–76.

[21] See for example: Latham, p. 229; D. H. Moutray Read, 'Funeral customs of Hampshire', *Folk-Lore*, vol. 22 (1911), p. 319; John Nicholson, *The Folk Lore of East Yorkshire* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, & Co., 1890), p. 5.

moment at the deathbed when the gathered friends and family stand silent as the last breath is taken:

> When the signs of death are observed the windows and door are thrown wide open, and a silence as still as death itself is maintained, so that nothing shall either hinder the dark angel from setting his seal on their loved one, or impede the soul's flight over the borderland into that of the great unknown.[22]

The house, then, forms an earthly prison for the spirit which must be breached – a soul cannot pass through walls but must have windows and doors opened for it – and the family must assist the spirit in order for it to find its rightful place in an ethereal afterlife. Another common practice of this type was the covering of mirrors lest the spirit become trapped inside their shiny, reflective surfaces.[23] The final folkloric rituals of the deathbed signal the ending of one period of time and the beginning of another. Family members represented this transition by stopping all the clocks, closing the blinds or curtains, and extinguishing the fire in the room where death took place. The domestic folklore of the deathbed established a form of social communication amongst the close family and friends who had congregated to witness the last moments of their loved one, each belief converted into a bodily-enacted ritual. But what sense can we make of these physical actions and what function or emotional significance do they hold?

Actively Letting Go

For some rural Victorians death was not a smooth transition; not everyone peacefully slipped away from their deathbed after making their final farewells. Some 'died hard', taking days or weeks to die, teetering on the edge, often in pain, and for family and friends in these circumstances sadness and grief could be compounded by feelings of helplessness. Nineteenth-century folkloric rituals offered the family a way to feel helpful and made use of the belief that their deep emotional ties could explain their loved one's apparent inability to die. The widespread belief that a person could be 'held back' from dying by someone loving them too much or wishing them to stay gave families agency.

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[22] Blakeborough, p. 120.

[23] Charlotte Sophia Burne, ed., *Shropshire Folk-Lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings from the collection of Georgina F. Jackson*, (London: Trubner and Co., 1883), p. 299; Henderson, p. 57; Gutch and Peacock, p. 240.

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It also reflected an Evangelical view of Heaven as somewhere that the soul belongs and where the family will one day be reunited.[24] This version of Heaven provides a reason for the family to 'let go' as by doing so they end earthly suffering and allow the spirit to move on to be at peace in the afterlife. The concept of 'holding back' cannot be properly understood without recognising the perceived emotional power of love; it acknowledges a strong connection between family members which created an invisible but potent bond, difficult to sever. Folklore preserves an older tradition of familiar investment in, and involvement with, the dead, indicating that before the person had even died the family were mindful of how the bond between them could or would continue after death had taken place. It echoes earlier purgatorial thinking and demonstrates that the gathered family had a role to play in easing death and guiding the spirit on to the afterlife.

The helplessness experienced by the family at a deathbed could be mitigated by the belief that they could hasten or ease a hard death by emotionally letting their loved one go. However, this perceived power could also be misused and sometimes, as shown by this anecdote in *Notes & Queries*, to withhold it was seen as a selfish act:

> I said to Mrs. B., "Poor little H. lingered a long time; I thought when I saw him, that he must have died the same day, but he lingered on!" "Yes," said Mrs. B., "it was a great shame of his mother. He wanted to die, and she would not let him die; she couldn't part with him. There she stood, fretting over him, and couldn't give him up; and so we said to her, 'He'll never die till you give him up!' And then she gave him up; and he died quite peaceably."[25]

With a peaceful death achieved, a parent could feel they had enacted one last great act of love by giving 'permission' for their child to pass on. In this context death is portrayed as a blessed relief and those keeping their loved one from dying were thought to be acting with cruelty. The Victorian attitude to expressing emotion was dichotomous, as evidenced by Thomas Dixon's wide-ranging analysis of British tears.[26]

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[24] See Julie Rugg, 'From Reason to Regulation: 1760–1850', in Jupp and Gittings, pp. 202-230 (p. 213).

[25] A letter written to *Notes & Queries* regarding deathbed folklore in which the correspondent shares their experience of visiting a family who believed in 'holding back', as quoted in Thiselton, *English Folklore*, p. 229.

[26] Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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On the one hand there was an upturn in sentimental writing, as typified by the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which, as Nicola Bown has pointed out, allowed people to cry and express their emotions in the privacy of their sitting room.[27] This coincided with the Romantic idea that true grief was silent, internal, and beyond tears. For men especially it became unseemly to cry: instead, a stoical restraint was admired and encouraged.[28] Jalland too reflects on the fact that in the early part of the nineteenth century the Evangelical tradition encouraged emotion at the deathbed but by the late nineteenth century emotional inhibition increased.[29] This pressure to contain emotion at the deathbed is corroborated by folklorist Eleanor Hull in her collection of British folklore: 'Tears should not be allowed to fall heavily upon the dead, for the dropping of the tears of mourners are felt like heavy weights, hindering the deceased from the rest he needs'.[30]

The requirement for stoicism emerged from a long tradition. Susan Broomhall discusses how in the early modern period, pregnant women were urged not to allow any strong emotion to be enacted bodily, lest it have a negative effect on the unborn child, placing a 'moral duty' on the soon-to-be mother.[31] This idea of a moral duty extended to the deathbed, with the concept of 'holding back' placing a responsibility on the gathered family to control their visible grief and emotionally let go of the dying to ensure a swift and painless passing. The longevity of this belief suggests that stoicism in the face of death, rather than the Evangelical loosening of emotional restraint, was the standard model of emotional expression. The 'moral duty' to contain emotion reflected in 'holding back' foreshadows more modern notions of the power of letting go explored by Sigmund Freud, who suggested that the 'work of mourning' was to

[27] Nicola Bown, 'Introduction: Crying Over Little Nell', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007) <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.453> [accessed 07/10/2023].
[28] Dixon, p. 145, 195.
[29] Pat Jalland, Death in the Victorian Family, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 54.
[30] Eleanor Hull, *Folklore of the British Isles* (London: Methuen, 1928), p. 210.
[31] Susan Broomhall, 'Beholding Suffering and Providing Care: Emotional Performances on the Death of Poor Children in Sixteenth-Century French Institutions', in *Death, Emotion and Childhood in Premodern Europe*, ed. by K. Barclay et al. (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 65–86 (p. 69).

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begin to sever emotional ties with the dead.[32] Among his wealthy, urban clients in Vienna, Freud identified a condition he called 'melancholia'.[33] Those suffering from melancholia had failed to complete the 'work of mourning', indicating that modern, urban deathways did not allow for the same emotional processing that traditional rural deathways did. Urban mourners were disconnected from their dead, paid professionals were now responsible for nursing and preparing the dead for burial, leaving the family as observers at the deathbed who played no active role in their loved one's death. In contrast, the practices surrounding the rural deathbed, at which ritualised farewells appropriately routed emotion, ensured that the mourner was not left alienated from the dead body and enabled them to begin processing their grief.

'Holding back' was a gendered tradition; it was always women who were identified as those with the power to 'hold' a loved one back, for good or for ill. One folklore collection from 1895 includes an anecdote which demonstrates the continuing belief that excessive grief prevented the dead from being at rest:

> An old woman still living (1854) in Piersebridge [sic], who mourned with inordinate grief for a length of time the loss of a favourite daughter, asserts that she was visited by the spirit of her departed child, and earnestly exhorted not to disturb her peaceful repose by unnecessary lamentations and repinings at the will of God; and from that time she never grieved more.[34]

The vision is not of a restless spirit, but one who returns simply to ask that their 'peaceful repose' not be disrupted by her mother's continued grief. This imagined request seems to have provided reassurance to the mother that their daughter was safe on the other side and a realisation that her own misery was providing a barrier to them both moving forward. Anecdotes such as this detail the belief that it is necessary to reconfigure the relationship to the newly-dead by mentally releasing one version of their loved one and accepting that their place is now in the afterlife.

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[32] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, vol. XIV (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), p. 255.

[33] Freud, p. 244.

[34] Dr James Hardy ed., *The Denham Tracts* (London: The Folklore Society, 1895), p. 58.

Agency and the Safe Onward Journey of the Spirit

The agency of the family in assuring an easy death by not 'holding them back' is enacted through an invisible, interior emotional response. However, most of the other folkloric rituals of the deathbed had very real and active bodily enactments and this is typified by the belief that removing pigeon or game feathers from the bed of a dying person could precipitate their death. The Rev. Morris provides an account from rural North Yorkshire from 1892:

> I was told not long since of one Jane H, from the neighbourhood of Westerdale, that she was lying upon a bed of that description; that she was in extremis for a week, and when it was thought she could not die in consequence of being upon a bed of wild birds' feathers they took her off it and laid her upon a squab, where, as I was informed, she died at once![35]

The folklore collections contain numerous versions of this tale, in which a person is removed from their bed and laid on the floor, moved to a chair, or in one case hoisted off the bed with a winch fashioned from bedsheets, all ending with the same result that the loved one, at last, could die peacefully. Blakeborough implies that this belief could work both ways — not only could death be hastened by removing pigeon feathers but it could also be intentionally delayed by placing them under the head of a person near death:

> Instances are on record of pigeon feathers having been placed in a small bag, and thrust under dying persons to hold them back, until the arrival of some loved one; but the meeting having taken place, the feathers were withdrawn, and death allowed to enter.[36]

Blakeborough's language imbues the pigeon feathers with great power, their removal allowing death 'to enter'. The enactment of this ritual emphasises the cultural importance of gathering to say farewell to the dying, the positioning of the pigeon feathers making time for this emotional moment to take place, fortifying family bonds. Some agency over the moment of death could thus be regained by using feathers as

[35] Morris, p. 238.

[36] Blakeborough, p. 120.

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magical objects to hasten or delay the final moment, removal of the feathers representing an embodiment of the internally realised action of letting go.

Another distinctive cluster of folkloric deathbed customs emerges around the moments after death, placing responsibility for the soul's safe passage to the afterlife on the shoulders of the living in ways that clearly echo pre-Reformation religious beliefs. Although they might be partly motivated by love, these actions, intended to ensure the spirit moves on and does not become trapped on earth, also foreground another emotion: fear. Christine Quigley describes the period directly after death as 'latent life' when the dead are still believed to linger around their body for an undefined period of time after the heart has ceased to beat.[37] Quigley and Gillian Bennett both argue that some confusion continued to be felt well into the twentieth century about the nature of this spirit, with some believing it could attract evil while others report its reassuring presence.[38] This fear is reflected in the practice of keeping silent directly after a death has taken place which evokes the ancient idea that uttering a person's name is a summoning act.[39] By remaining quiet the family can hope that their loved one will move seamlessly to the next world, and will not be tempted to linger.

A spirit that does not pass on to the afterlife and remains in the home becomes malign because it is not in its correct place and therefore must be positively encouraged to move on by the ritual throwing open of windows and doors.[40] The accepted reasoning behind this custom linked the opening of doors and windows to a Roman Catholic concept of the soul and the perils of purgatory.[41] Certainly before the Reformation rituals for the dead were played out as a form of reciprocal behaviour: the living would pray for the dead to move quickly through purgatory and then the dead, when safely in Heaven, would pray for their living relatives.[42] Ruth Richardson argues that this theme of reciprocity in folk customs continued into the nineteenth century with

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[37] Christine Quigley, *The Corpse: A History* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland, 1996), p. 51.

[38] Gillian Bennett, *Traditions of Belief: Women and the Supernatural* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 50; Quigley, p. 16.

[39] See entry on 'incantation' in *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

[40] Nicholson, p. 5; Addy, p. 123.

[41] Marshall, p. 7.

[42] Marshall, p. 11.

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friends and family enacting rituals of care as a good deed redeemed against their own soul, their attentions also ensuring their loved one's soul would attain rest. I would argue that in the nineteenth century this had less to do with continuing concepts of purgatory and more to do with a fear of haunting, the impetus not coming so much from reciprocity as from a desire to exert some agency over the safe onward journey of the spirit. A fear of haunting is often given as a primary reason for many of these traditions, with folklorist Charlotte Sophia Burne commenting that: 'Many of the old-fashioned customs at a death-bed are due to the dread of ghosts'.[43] The preoccupation with the safe onward flight of the spirit thus reflected not only a loving wish that the soul reach the afterlife but also an anxiety about ghosts, death, and the dead body, revealing that these rituals could manifest many emotional states and hold multiple meanings for those enacting them.

Folklorists and folklore enthusiasts discussed the meaning of the practice of opening windows and doors in the pages of *Notes & Queries,* the *Athenaeum* and via the journal of the Folklore Society: 'it originates from the belief which formerly prevailed that the soul flew out of the mouth of the dying in the likeness of a bird'.[44] Another folklorist suggests that 'the folk' believed that during the last breath the soul departs the body in the form of vapour.[45] And yet another that: 'the soul resembles a flame, and hovers round the hearth for a certain period after death'.[46] These accounts all point to the belief that the soul has some sort of physical presence, even a tangible 'vapour' that might be glimpsed as it departs. The concept of a soul has existed for thousands of years and yet, unlike other popular visual concepts such as 'blindfolded Justice', Moshe Barasch argues, no single imagery has become dominant, leaving the soul imagined in numerous forms.[47] It is not depicted in art, as one might imagine, as a smaller ghostly version of the person who has died but rather it is often an anonymous figure, its age, gender, and characteristics unclear. This insinuates that popular belief in

[43] Burne, p. 299.

[44] Letter to the *Athenaeum* (No. 990), 17 Oct. 1846, as quoted in *Choice Notes from Notes & Queries*, p. 117.

[45] *Choice Notes from Notes & Queries*, p. 119.

[46] Henderson, p. 53.

[47] Moshe Barasch, 'The Departing Soul. The Long Life of a Medieval Creation', *Artibus et Historiae*, 26.52 (2005), 13–28 (p. 14).

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the soul conceives it as beyond human, the physical body acting as a mere shell for the soul.

The nature of the departing soul is again brought into question when considering that the folkloric depiction of the spirit implies that in this moment it can be blocked by a closed window. Traditionally ghosts or spectres are portrayed as able to pass through physical objects, moving with ease through the house, and yet the departing soul cannot move so freely, indicating that it was seen as materially different to a haunting spirit. When it first exits the body the spirit still holds the essence of the loved one and therefore must be carefully ushered on to the afterlife as an act of care, whereas a ghost or haunting spirit has undergone a transformation; they are no longer a reassuring presence but have become threatening and troublesome. The fear of haunting then encodes some anxiety about death occurring in the domestic sphere, as if the very materiality of the home and its furnishing can somehow absorb and trap a spirit, turning a peaceful soul into a tormented captive. Becoming trapped on earth was akin to purgatory and, much like physical act of removing pigeon feathers, these traditional rituals literally make the path clear for the spirit. When bodily enacted, the traditional rituals around death become accepted ways to express grief and loss, show care and compassion, and invoke in those witnessing the rituals the same socially conditioned emotional response. These unspoken social codes allow emotions to be experienced and managed collectively, working to strengthen familial bonds.

Marking a Distinct Emotional Phase

The final folkloric rituals of the deathbed, such as covering mirrors, extinguishing the fire and stopping the clocks, served to signal the end of the period of sickness and dying. An account from 1898 asserts that: ‘So soon as the vital spark has left its earthly house, the fire, if such be burning in the room, is immediately extinguished’.[48] By putting the fire out the family were communicating that the room held no more comfort for the dead; it was no longer a warm and welcoming space. It signalled to all those in the room (and perhaps to the spirit too) that a transition had occurred, a light had gone out. The physical act of putting out the fire implies an ending, it draws a line under the period of dying and signals a moment of pause until the fire is made anew. The stopping of clocks was another way this end period was expressed – one account has

[48] Blakeborough, p. 122.

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the clock stopped and then covered with a veil as if to freeze that moment in time.[49] Helen Frisby convincingly argues that 'This suggests a literal stopping of time and the household's entry into a liminal state of existence in which normal time did not apply'.[50] It echoes Quigley's idea of 'latent life' and the belief in the rural home that the period between death and burial represents a distinct emotional phase during which the family can make their farewells and begin to process their loss.

The folkloric rituals associated with clocks and mirrors are notable not only because of the meaning inscribed in the act but also because these were relatively modern technologies for the Victorians. As Frisby points out:

> Since silver-glass mirrors, which were capable of mass production and therefore affordable to ordinary people, were only invented in 1835, such belief in the magical power of mirrors exemplifies the projection of magic onto the products of modern mass manufacture and market capitalism.[51]

Clocks were also not often found in the homes of working-class people until nearer the end of the nineteenth-century when technology and manufacturing techniques made them smaller and more affordable. By imbuing mirrors and clocks with magic and co-opting them into older existing traditions of the deathbed, 'the folk' reveal that folklore in the nineteenth-century was not static but evolving. As new technologies entered the home they were absorbed into extant beliefs, melding old with new, assisting their integration into existing customs and encouraging the continued development and practice of folkloric ways to manage grief and mark time.

Conclusion

The traditions at the deathbed may each have slightly different meaning or intention, yet placed together as a collection, they provided a framework for the expected behaviour of the gathered family, allowing the collective practice of emotion and the expression of care. The following account from Yorkshire from 1890 reveals how folkloric rituals were generally performed as part of a sequence:

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[49] Gutch and Peacock, p. 240.

[50] Helen Frisby, '"Them Owls Know": Portending Death in Later Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-century England', *Folklore*, 126.2 (2015), 196–214 (p. 207).

[51] Frisby, p. 207.

> When, by holding a hand glass to the mouth, it has been ascertained that death has taken place, the door or window of the room is opened to allow the spirit to pass out easily, and if, owing to the presence of pigeon's feathers in the bed, the death has been so hard that the poor creature has been lifted in the sheet off the bed on to the floor, the body is returned to the bedstead and laid out. All the looking glasses in the house are either turned to the wall or covered up, and the clocks stopped.[52]

This narrative gives a clearer picture that these individual rituals are forming part of a whole sequence of customs that guided the family's behaviour during this period of transition and helped them to begin to process their loss before the finality of burial. These bodily-expressed emotions at the deathbed thus become cultural practices which are passed down through the generations as a form of social communication.[53] Prior to the Reformation religion had offered a series of duties and ceremonies for the family to carry out at the deathbed, providing purpose and reassurance that their actions had safely ushered their loved one to Heaven.[54] By the nineteenth century, long after the loss of purgatorial deathbed rituals, folklore filled this gap, bringing its own set of customs and practices which acted as a uniting force for the rural working-class family.

By analysing the folkloric rituals of the deathbed which were still being performed by the rural working classes at the close of the nineteenth century we can see that the transformation of the deathbed in urban centres—in which professionals such as nurses, doctors, and undertakers began to take on the roles previously held by family—was not echoed in rural locations. This intervention enriches our understanding of Victorian death culture by reinserting rural traditions into the discourse and encouraging a more heterogeneous approach to the wide range of beliefs and practices it encompassed. After the Reformation, when the concept of purgatory was rejected, the requirement to pray for the soul became obsolete, but belief in the need to guide the soul safely to the afterlife still lingered in popular folkloric ritual. Not only did folklore provide a framework of behaviours that gave families some structure with which to guide their emotional responses to death but it also offered them a way to

[52] Nicholson, p. 5.

[53] Scheer, p. 195.

[54] See Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Magic, Science and Religion' in *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, ed. by Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 19–22 (p. 22).

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feel agency and enact care for the deceased by performing embodied rituals to ease a hard death and usher their loved one to the afterlife. For the rural working classes, enacting inherited traditions provided a familiar framework for navigating the emotional turmoil of the deathbed, uniting the family in their grief, and providing an active way to show care and compassion to the deceased.

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