ONE

ELEGIA AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

When one is afraid to ask the wife of a tradesman whom she has lost of her family; and after some preparation endeavours to know whom she mourns for; how ridiculous is it to hear her explain herself, “That we have lost one of the house of Austria!”

(Richard Steele, Spectator #64 [1711])

Mourning, Morals, and Money

This chapter interprets the cultural meanings of mourning in the Enlightenment. Since my analysis will invoke disciplines as diverse as literature, philosophy, politics, and economics, it seems a good idea to start by saying what I am not attempting here. First, although “the elegy” is my point of departure, I do not offer a comprehensive literary history of elegy per se; to show why such a history would miss both the point and the purview of mourning during the Enlightenment is one of the burdens of my argument. Second, while this chapter describes a shift in the representation of mourning during the first half of the eighteenth century, it necessarily anticipates developments more easily discerned in texts written during the latter half of the century. While such anticipations may seem to risk compromising what is historical about this account of the British Enlightenment, they also register the perils of narrating as developments what are more truly glimpsed as latencies and tendencies. Finally, a caveat about the eponymous personification of Elegia in this chapter’s title. While my argument does not focus sustainedly on the vexed relations between gender and genre, it repeatedly demonstrates (and at moments, lingers over) the implication of gender in ostensibly formal generic categories. The Enlightenment shift toward the masculine gendering of mourning—a shift described in the change from Steele’s “wife of a tradesman” to Gray’s “rude forefathers of the hamlet”—accompanies a strengthening conviction in the public significance of mourning. Such masculinization of mourning was not reversed until the Victorian period; that the Victorians should at once have domesticated and refeminized mourning is not, as I shall argue at the end of this study, as retrograde a symmetry as it might seem. While I want to render the contours of this symmetry boldly, I have tried also
to shade them with historical specificity, placing them in the context of larger debates about gender and power.

This chapter, first, makes claims for the increasing centrality of mourning during Britain’s coming of age as an economic and political power; and second, anticipates the pressures—both extrinsic and intrinsic, historical and textual—countervailing this phenomenon in the final decades of the eighteenth century. What promoted mourning to this position of importance was the convergence of two needs, needs announced variously in the discourses of morals and money. First, moral philosophers such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson sought to link an individual’s “moral sense”—an inborn, natural basis for moral judgement—with the morals of the community. With Hume and later Adam Smith, attention became focused on the phenomenon of sympathy, on the possible ways in which individual sympathies might provide the basis for a public morality. In Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the need to theorize a public morality dovetails with the need to address the precariousness of an economy increasingly dependent on paper money and credit. Smith’s theory suggests that the dead become, as it were, the gold standard for the circulation of sympathies within a society; at a single stroke, Smith both provides a theoretical account of the relation between private morals and public morality and suggests a role for mourning in remediating anxieties attending the proliferation of paper money in the British economy. Smith’s metaphorical economy of British morals in the 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*—as one might expect, corollary tropes of a moralized economy would appear in the 1776 *Wealth of Nations*—licensed a new esteem for literary mourning, for by promoting social homogeneity, mourning figuratively filled both the hearts and the coffers of the nation. This chapter argues that textual mourning is the rhetorical praxis for which Smith’s concept of a dynamic, circulating, sympathetic culture of mourning is the theory.

**An Unfortunate Lady**

I want to approach the culture of mourning in the Enlightenment by taking up a point of debate in early eighteenth-century letters: the contested meaning of the formal term “elegy.” Pastoral elegy, admired during the Renaissance in Britain and on the continent, had been out of vogue for nearly a century; in 1638 *Lycidas* became the sole pastoral elegy in the memorial volume for Edward King. While the pastoral mode would survive into the eighteenth century as a satiric resource, the pastoral elegy would become an object of ridicule. By mid-century, Johnson’s famous disparagement of *Lycidas*—“Where there is leisure
for fiction, there is little grief”—would apply a new critical standard of sincerity to pastoral elegy and find it absurdly wanting.

But the poem’s “grosser fault,” for Johnson, is the mingling of “trifling fictions” with “the most awful and sacred truths.” Such “irreverend combinations” threaten to render the Christian apotheosis of the shepherd Lycidas yet another symptom of the poem’s artifice. Johnson deems Milton “not to have been conscious” of such “impiety,” though more recent critics, such as Sacks, have disagreed. But that Johnson trembles for Milton’s “sacred truths” suggests a reading public accustomed to sophisticated, “impious” readings of Christian poetry, and augurs the nineteenth-century revival of pastoral elegy in a resoundingly “impious” register.

The decline of pastoral elegy, along with its consolations of Christian apotheosis, was perhaps inevitable in an age that saw, in Ariès’s words, a “decline in eschatological concern within the Christian faith.” This was, after all, an era in which the Christian ethos of rewarding the good after death was explicitly attacked as a self-interested basis for moral action; little wonder that the dominant idea of elegy ceased to rest on the consoling visions of Christian pastoral. Instead, theorists of the belles lettres turned to the Latin elegies of Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid, which had a century earlier provided the elegiac models for Milton’s seven Latin elegies and which would now shape what was known as “elegy” in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

If the Latin elegy was metrically well-defined by the elegiac distich—a hexameter followed by a pentameter—it was notoriously ill-defined in terms of its themes. Throughout the eighteenth century, English commentators sought alternately to redefine the elegy in nonmetric terms, and to establish an English metric analogue to the Latin distich. Attempting to reconceive the elegy formally, thematically, and stylistically, theorists of elegy such as Joseph Trapp (1712; Eng. trans. 1742), John Newbery (1762), William Shenstone (1764), an anonymous contributor to the Annual Register (1767), and Nathan Drake (1798) would transform the elegy from a function of meter and matter to a function of mind; by so doing, they would reinvent an objective form—the elegy—as a subjective mode—the elegiac. But the terms “objective” and “subjective” are, in this connection, slightly misleading. For this transformation from form to mode, paradoxically, is subtended by a larger cultural transformation in the construction of private and public morality. The “elegy” becomes “elegiac” precisely when the public, moral significance of individual mourning becomes widely recognized. A closer look at the problematic theorizing of “elegy” in the early eighteenth century will show how a morally dubious poetic form was, in time, transformed into a morally beneficent discursive mode.
For Joseph Trapp, attempting to legitimate poetry, “venerable both for its Antiquity and its Religion” in the first lectures on poetry at Oxford (1712), the elegy is a negligible—though, intriguingly, not neglected—topic. Adhering to the Horatian maxim that poetry should instruct and delight, Trapp asks, “What, in short, is [Poetry] else but the utmost Effort of the Mind of Man, that tries all its Nerves, while it infuses into it a Tincture of universal Learning temper’d with the greatest Sweetness” (9). Moral “profit,” writes Trapp,

may be the chief End of Poetry, and ought to be so, but for that very Reason Pleasure should be joined to it, and accompany it, as a Handmaid, to minister to its Occasions. When Children are allured with the sweeten’d Draught, or gilded Pill, they, as the Physician intended, consider nothing but the Beauty of the one, or the Taste of the other: But it is well known, this was not the chief intent of the Physician in his Prescription.

This Rule relates principally to the more perfect and sublimer kinds of Poetry, and especially the Epic and Dramatic. For we don’t pretend that Epigram, Elegy, Song and the like, conduce much to the Improvement of Virtue. It is enough, if these Writings keep within the Bounds of Chastity, and give no Offense in Good-manners. (25)

Moral “profit” may only be had from poetry when the balance of manly virtues exceeds that of feminine charms, as is the case in the “more perfect and sublimer kinds of Poetry.” From the standpoint of “rais[ing] the mind to Virtue and Honour, by delivering down the Examples of Great Men to Immortality”(8–9), Trapp recommends the genres of epic and tragedy. Not surprisingly, Trapp identifies his own labors with that of the epic poet Milton: “I must own myself under some Concern, when I consider that I enter into a Province unattempted by others, and wherein I have no Footsteps to guide me” (1). Tragedy, like epic, typifies the power of poetry not only to “[celebrate] heroes, but [to make] them.” Despite its exhibition of heroism, tragedy, like elegy, stirs the passions; but Trapp exonerates tragedy from moral dubiousness by designating Aristotelian catharsis as a masculine exercise: “[Tragedies] unbend the Mind, without debasing it to Softness, and Effeminity”(323). The elegy, as “the sweetest, the most engaging” type of poetry (163), epitomizes the “softer,” morally uncertain, in short feminine qualities of poetry. From this gendered casting emerges a clear generic hierarchy. Trapp situates the elegy on the second rung of the generic ladder between lowest-ranked epigram and third-ranked pastoral; tragedy and epic, treated in the final lectures, occupy the ninth and tenth rungs, respectively.

Trapp’s casting of elegy as feminine reflects less its capacity to stir
emotion, than its refusal to be answerable to literary rules. Even in the mid-1740s, William Shenstone would note that “there have been few rules given us by the critics concerning the structure of elegiac poetry.”

Elegiac poetry was more wayward even in its themes than in its structure, for the Latin elegy embraced both serious, moral, subjects and jocular, satirical ones. Worse yet, the Latin elegy at times addressed moral seriousness to erotic subject matter, confounding the moral categories of virtue and vice. Shenstone also mentions “the great variety of subjects . . . in which the writers of elegy have hitherto indulged themselves” (1:3–4).

It is telling that both Trapp and Shenstone attempt to mythologize this thematic variety as a moral lapse or deviation from a point of origin. Trapp asserts that while the elegy originates as a funeral poem, a wide variety of poems soberly cloaked in distiches go “under the Name of Elegies” (164). For Shenstone, extending the primordial elegiac object—the illustrious dead—to include “absent or neglected lovers” was a tolerable “indulgence.” But once having

obtained a small corner in the province of love, [elegists] took advantage, from thence, to overrun the whole territory. . . . They gave the name of elegy to their pleasainties as well as lamentation; till at last, through their abundant fondness for the myrtle, they forget that the cypress was their peculiar garland. (1:4–5)

Trapp and Shenstone both urge the chastening of elegy, though it must be noted that both consider this compatible with amorous subject matter. Shenstone defines the elegy by a certain “manner of treating” the subject—the sustenance of “a tender and querulous idea.” Trapp, observing that “the chief Subjects to which Elegy owes its Rise, are Death and Love” (165), advocates extending the category to reflect “the larger sense of the Word, as it was used by the Ancients” and to include “Many very ingenious ones on Love, and others of a melancholy and soft Turn” (169). He summarily excludes from the elegiac category “epigrammatical, satirical, or sublime poetry”; “Elegy aims not to be witty or facetious, acrimonious or severe, majestic or sublime; but is smooth, humble, and unaffected; nor is she abject in her Humility, but becoming, elegant, and attractive” (169).

In Trapp’s strict, gendered antithesis between elegiac softness and the firm muscle of tragedy, humility is the apex of elegiac morality. Shenstone, however, understands elegiac morality to be considerably more complex. He focuses the matter of gender on the audience, not the text, distinguishing between two types of elegies on the basis of their implied addressees:
Love-elegy therefore is more negligent of order and design, and, being addressed chiefly to the ladies, requires little more than tenderness and perspicuity. Elegies, that are formed upon promiscuous incidents, and addressed to the world in general, inculcate some sort of moral and admit a different degree of reasoning, thought, and order. (1:10)

By opposition to “the ladies,” “the world in general” constitutes an implicitly masculine audience; as such, the worldly (as opposed to erotic) elegy incorporates the masculine values of “reasoning, thought, and order.” Even if “formed upon promiscuous incidents,” elegies are accountable to the “end of all poetry”:

... to encourage virtue. Epic and tragedy chiefly recommend the public virtues; elegy is of a species which illustrates and endears the private. There is a truly virtuous pleasure connected with many pensive contemplations, which it is the province and excellence of elegy to enforce. (1:6)

Far from being antithetical, elegy on the one hand and tragedy and epic on the other are leagued in the inculcation of virtue:

[Elegy] magnifies the sweets of liberty and independence, that endears the honest delights of love and friendship, that celebrates the glory of a good name after death, that ridicules the futile arrogance of birth, that recommends the innocent amusement of letters, and insensibly prepares the mind for the humanity it inculcates. (1:6)

Whereas tragedy and epic propound public virtues, elegy is morally salutary for propounding private ones. By the 1740s, the elegy had absorbed many of the values previously in the domain of Renaissance pastoral—liberty, independence, friendship, reputation, modesty, and sober amusements.

Published in 1717, Pope’s “Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady,” provides evidence for Shenstone’s insistence on the moral potential of elegy. In his “Elegy,” Pope elegantly sidesteps Christian eschatology by selecting as the mourned object of his elegy a suicide. Whereas Lycidas ends with a vision of the redeemed poet’s succour among the “sweet Societies” of Saints, Pope’s “Elegy” begins with a vision of the lonely reprobate’s enduring suffering:

What beck’ning ghost, along the moonlight shade
Invites my step, and points to yonder glade?
’Tis she!—but why that bleeding bosom gor’d,
Why dimly gleams the visionary sword?
Oh ever beauteous, ever friendly! tell,
Is it, in heav’n, a crime to love too well?
To bear too tender, or too firm a heart,
To act a Lover’s or a Roman’s part?
Is there no bright reversion in the sky,
For those who greatly think, or bravely die?¹⁰

(lines 1–10)

Lycidas may enjoy a “large recompense,” but the sky portends no “bright reversion” for this Lady. Having been buried outside the “sacred earth” of the churchyard, her ghost returns to the melancholy shades and glades from which she had been exiled by her guardian.

Keeping the Lady nameless—presumably an attempt to protect her reputation—Pope in fact lowers her reputation by linking this “Lover” with “bleeding bosom” to the pseudonymous women of pleasure yearned for and lamented in the Latin erotic elegy. While her own erotic passion is minimized, her “ruby lips,” “cheeks, now fading,” “breast which warm’d the world before,” and “love-darting eyes” mark her as a provocative object of the poet’s sexual interest. Johnson, who “sought with fruitless inquiry” the Lady’s identity, was merely one of many readers who tried to “raise the lady’s character” by identifying her (324). To ennoble this anonymous renegade from Christian virtue, Pope identifies her fault with that of “kings and heroes.”

But her high aspirations, ambition, and glowing soul merely render “glorious” her indelible faults:

Why bade ye else, ye Pow’rs! her soul aspire
Above the vulgar flight of low desire?
Ambition first sprung from your blest abodes;
The glorious fault of Angels and of Gods:
Thence to their Images on earth it flows,
And in the breasts of Kings and Heroes glows!

(lines 11–16)

Johnson, ever acute, would fault Pope for “condemn[ing] the uncle to detestation for his pride” (388–89) immediately after Pope praises the Lady for her Satanic ambition; Johnson also challenges this Lady’s “claim to praise [or] to compassion,” finding no reason to sympathize with this “impatient, violent, and ungovernable” woman (324). Indeed, because the guardian failed to sympathize with her, his family incurs the Furies’ pitless curse: “So perish all, whose breast ne’er learn’d to glow/
For others’ good, or melt at others’ woe” (45–46). Whereas pastoral elegy seeks to blame the perpetrator of the death, Pope curses the guardian not for killing the Lady (which he ostensibly did not), but for being—unforgivably—unsympathetic.

Precisely because there is no reason to sympathize with the Lady, Pope represents sympathy as a natural phenomenon.
What tho’ no friends in sable weeds appear,
Grieve for an hour, perhaps, then mourn a year,
And bear about the mockery of woe
To midnight dances, and the publick show?
What tho’ no weeping Loves thy ashes grace,
Nor polish’d marble emulate thy face?
What tho’ no sacred earth allow thee room,
Nor hallow’d dirge be mutter’d o’er thy tomb?
Yet shall thy grave with rising flow’rs be drest,
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast:
There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
There the first roses of the year shall blow;
While Angels with their silver wings o’ershade
The ground, now sacred by thy reliques made.

Having cut a dubious figure as a Roman hero, the Lady—in death—is now linked with the milder virtues of pastoral otium. Derived from Latin epitaphs and Virgilian pastorals, Pope’s nature provides the moral authority for ridiculing the arts and shows of mourning—the “sable weeds,” ornate urns, funerary sculpture, and dirges of funereal rites. But, having expanded his scope beyond the Lady’s death to consider the antithesis between “natural” and cultural mourning, Pope relinquishes an opportunity either to enlarge further the moral scope of his poem or to offer precepts for elegiac poetry.

Instead, after a perfunctory *sic transit gloria mundi*, he draws his poem like a curtain around himself:

Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung;
Deaf the prais’d ear, and mute the tuneful tongue.
Ev’n he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays,
Shall shortly want the gen’rous tear he pays;
Then from his closing eyes thy form shall part,
And the last pang shall tear thee from his heart,
Life’s idle business at one gasp be o’er,
The Muse forgot, and thou belov’d no more!

It is the poet, finally, on whose sympathy the Lady’s imperiled memory rests. Pointedly, the elegist is linked not to the monuments of funereal culture, but to the spontaneity of grief—singing, melting, and weeping. In lieu of “the bright reversion” which the sky refuses to provide the Lady, the poet pays a “gen’rous tear” which will, in turn, be due him.
when his own death arrives. By generously assuming and repaying
heaven’s debt, the elegist’s exemplary sympathy motivates a legacy of
poetic sympathy. Here elegiac poetry does not yield the moral “profit”
afforded by epic poetry; on the contrary, a paucity of Christian virtue—
the ghostly deficit that floats between an assumed debt and an expected
tribute—makes possible the tender human relations between poet and
lady, reader and poet.

While Pope’s “Elegy” suggests the elegy’s increasing distance from the
structures, figures, and myths of Christian eschatology, it may well alle-
gorize the career of Elegia, the eponymous muse of elegy, in Pope’s cen-
tury. During the first three decades of the century, the elegy’s associa-
tions with femininity would be emphasized to argue that its virtue could
not be secured, or, if secured, was limited to the private, or domestic
sphere. Later, like Pope’s Lady, Elegia would be helped to overcome her
unfortunate associations with vice; her eroticism would be reinterpreted
as domestic affection; and finally, if she made little reference to public
morals, she would nonetheless be deemed capable of inculcating them in
others. The century of tears would open with Trapp citing Horace on the
elegy’s shady origins, but by mid-century, Elegia would preside—
among her comforters—in the salon.

The Bowl and the Urn

Writing about elegy in the 1740s, Shenstone would analogize the plea-
sures of the urn with those of the bowl: “[Elegy] . . . has discovered
sweets in melancholy which we could not find in mirth; and has led us
with much success to the dusty urn, when we could draw no pleasure
from the sparkling bowl” (1:6). But attempting to establish a necessary
link between individual morals and public morality was the work of
moral sense philosophers. As I will show later in this chapter, their at-
ttempt to conflate private and public virtue, culminating in Adam Smith’s
theory of sympathy, would be paralleled by the achievement of Gray’s
Elegy; accordingly, the contemporary philosophical context will help us
to interpret both that poem and its immense popularity.

Like Pope’s “Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady,” the
moral philosophy of Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury
(1671–1713), deflects rather than denies the burden of Christian escha-
tology. In the Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit, published in the first
dition of his Characteristicks (1711) and subsequently revised, Shaft-
esbury questions the moral, rather than metaphysical, value of Christian
eschatology:
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It may be consider’d withal; That, in this religious sort of Discipline, the Principle of Self-Love, which is naturally so prevailing in us, being no-way moderated, or restrain’d, but rather improv’d and made stronger every day, by the exercise of the Passions in a Subject of more extended Self-Interest; there may be reason to apprehend lest the Temper of this kind shou’d extend it-self in general thro all the Parts of Life.14

In Shaftesbury’s reading, the morality of Christian eschatology fails to raise individuals above an almost Hobbesian desire for self-preservation. On the contrary, Shaftesbury fears for a society in which “Self-love” and the passions are actively trained from infancy by the desire for heaven; heaven, under this description, becomes little more than a quivering fantasy of satisfied desire. But Shaftesbury’s attack on the morality of Christian “resignation” ushers Hobbesian “Self-love” into the eighteenth century, redefining it as economic self-interest:15

And if that which he calls Resignation depends only on the expectation of infinite Retribution or Reward, he discovers no more Worth or Virtue here, than in any other Bargain of Interest: The meaning of his Resignation being only this, “that he resigns his present Life, and Pleasures, conditionally for THAT which he himself confesses to be beyond an Equivalent; eternal Living, in a State of highest Pleasure and Enjoyment.” (36)

For Shaftesbury, the incommensurability between heavenly pleasures and sublunary sacrifice damns Christian eschatology as a “Bargain of interest.” Though published in 1711, the Characteristicks was most likely written twenty years earlier; certainly Shaftesbury’s sense of the immorality of interest sits uneasily beside Trapp’s blithe figure of moral “profit.” Still, Shaftesbury’s moral critique of Christian eschatology expresses fears about a future for virtue in a mercantile, capitalist society—fears that would continue to inform moral thought throughout the century.

The father of “moral sense” philosophy, Shaftesbury locates the basis of virtue in the human mind, rather than in an extrinsic metaphysical authority; he posits an intrinsic “moral sense,” an emotion of pleasurable approbation or painful disapprobation that arises from the mind’s reflection on actions, emotions, or perceptions. By defining virtue as the promotion of a social “system” or “kind,” Shaftesbury begs the question of how the moral sense yields moral imperatives; to bridge the gap between the moral “is” and the moral “ought,” Shaftesbury simply invokes a “use of reason, sufficient to secure a right application of the affections” (20).

Bridging this gap more sturdily became the work of two generations
of moral philosophers who followed Shaftesbury. Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), in *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) and *Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728), reconceives the operation of the moral sense as occasioned by perception as well as by reflection; as such, on the analogy of Lockean epistemology, he develops what has become known as a “spectator” theory of morals. Such a theory empowers Hutcheson’s thinking about how aesthetic phenomena—poetic and dramatic representations—implicate moral judgement: “We shall find [the moral] Sense to be the Foundation also of the chief Pleasures of Poetry. . . . Dramatic and Epic Poetry, are entirely address’d to this Sense, and raise our Passions by the Fortunes of Character, distinctly represented as morally good, or evil. . . .”16 In the *Illustrations*, Hutcheson cites the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* to demonstrate that moral approbation is not determined by self-interest:

[Had] we no Sense of moral Good in Humanity, Mercy, Faithfulness, why should not Self-love, and our sense of natural Good engage us always to the victorious side, and make us admire and love the successful Tyrant, or Traitor? Why do not we love Simon, or Pyrrhus, in the *Aeneid*? For had we been Greeks, these two would have been very advantageous Characters. Why are we affected with the Fortunes of Priamus, Polites, Choreobus, or Aeneas? (122)

Hutcheson even asserts that because the representations of poetry produce more lively ideas than the reflections of philosophers, poetry may be more efficacious than philosophy in promoting a normative morality:

Where we are studying to raise any Desire or Admiration of an Object really beautiful, we are not content with a bare Narration, but endeavour, if we can, to present the Object itself, or the most lively Image of it. And hence the Epic Poem, or Tragedy, gives a vastly greater Pleasure than the Writings of Philosophers, though both aim at recommending Virtue. The representing the Actions themselves, if the Representation be judicious, natural, and lively, will make us admire the good, and detect the Vicious, the Inhuman, the Treacherous and Cruel by means of our moral Sense, without any Reflections of the Poet to guide our sentiments. (261)

Indeed, Hutcheson’s thoughts on the power of Poetry to “recommend virtue” pull in two contrary directions. Hutcheson, drawn to the vividness of a moral stimulus that works immediately, by means of sensation, rather than mediately, by means of reflection, prefers a rhetoric of “image” to one of “narration.” He prefers, in other words, tragic and epic representations, which *show* virtuous or vicious moral exempla, to
philosophical or didactic treatises, which tell what is virtuous and what vicious.

At the same time, Hutcheson seems uneasy about the lack of discursive mediation in poetry and drama; counterfeited misery is dangerous because it calls on an audience to be compassionate regarding a sufferer of unknown morality in an unknown context. The lack of a mediating moral authority locates the responsibility for moral judgement with the spectator rather than with an authorized, mediating narrator. To compensate for this transfer of moral authority from author to spectator, Hutcheson insists on the significance of context to our perception of the object in question. Conversely, the spectacle of irremediable suffering threatens to take us out of our own context, threatening our social identity: “[I]f we see [that relief is] impossible, we may by Reflection discern it to be vain for us to indulge our compassion any further; and then Self-love prompts us to retire from the Object which occasions our Pain, and to endeavour to divert our Thoughts” (238). Because compassion can obscure the social identity of both sufferer and spectator, moral judgements based solely on compassion are viewed as a social threat. For Hutcheson, compassion can only give rise to normative virtue when the occasion of compassion is mediated.

Like Hume, who would note that tragedy makes use of historical people and places “to Procure a more easy reception of the whole,” Hutcheson emphasizes the historical basis of most tragic representations. The context of tragic action and utterance is “the moral Beauty of the Characters and Actions which we love to behold. For I doubt,” Hutcheson continues, “whether any Audience would be pleas’d to see fictitious Scenes of Misery, if they were kept stranger to the moral Qualitys of the sufferers, or their Characters and Actions” (239). Tragedy is morally beneficial not because its characters consistently exemplify virtue, but because their moral qualities, whether virtuous or vicious, are already known to the audience; based on historical events, tragic actions have already been normatively interpreted and assimilated. In Hutcheson’s theory of moral spectatorship, tragic performance stages the culturally sanctioned rehearsal of the individual’s moral judgement. While Hutcheson’s spectator theory intuits tension between individual judgements and social norms, it neither analyzes nor theorizes relations between private morals and public morality.

With David Hume (1711–1776), the theory of moral spectatorship becomes considerably more rigorous, but at the same time less adequate as a theory of normative morality. In Book II of his Treatise of Human Nature (1742) (“Of the Passions”), Hume asserts that “sympathy is exactly correspondent to the operations of our understanding”.

When any affection is infus’d by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. This idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection.

(317)

Our conversion of the idea into an impression depends on how closely the object of perception resembles ourselves; the locution of a “close” resemblance, Hume observes, uses spatial relations to metaphorize the vividness of a comparison. Since affliction and sorrow “have always a stronger and more lasting influence than any pleasure or enjoyment,” (369) Hume analyzes tragedy as a showcase for sympathy:

A spectator of tragedy passes thro’ a long train of grief, terror, indignation, and other affections, which the poet represents in the persons he introduces. . . . As [the distinct passions] are all first present in the mind of one person, and afterwards appear in the mind of another; and as the manner of their appearance, first as an idea, then as an impression, is in every case the same, the transition must arise from the same principle. (369–70)

In tragedy, each spectator “passes thro’ a long train” of affections; as each affection appears, it must in turn be imaginatively transformed from an idea into an impression. But the morality of the audience as a whole can only be expressed as the simple aggregate of each spectator’s sympathies at a given moment.

While for Hume tragic performance remains the prime aesthetic example of the moral sense, his significant pairing of “a very play or romance” (470) alters significantly Hutcheson’s (and Trapp’s and Shenstone’s) designation of tragedy and epic as the chief inculcators of moral virtue. For one thing, to substitute romance for epic is to select a domestic and feminine literary form as an aesthetic exemplar of the moral sense—in other words, to identify the moral sense with virtues associated with domesticity and privacy. This convergence of femininity and virtue is hardly coincidental to the development of moral sense theory; both Hutcheson and Hume evince the propensity of women and children to feel compassion as evidence that morality derives from an innate moral sense, rather than from custom or reason. For Hutcheson, “How independent this Disposition to Compassion is of custom, education, or instruction, will appear from the Prevalence of it in Women and Children, who are less influenc’d by these” (241). For Hume, the fact that “Women and children are most subject to pity, as being most guided by [imagination]”—that same “infirmity, which makes them faint at the
sight of a naked sword, tho' in the hands of their best friend” (370)—suggests that pity is derived from the imagination rather than, say, from “the instability of fortune and our being liable to the same miseries we behold” (370).

But rather than relegate morals to the private realm, Hume’s emphasis on the morality of romance suggests an altered sense of how individual moral judgements take on public significance. By citing romance—a popular, vernacular, and widely circulated literary form—in lieu of epic or tragedy, Hume draws attention to social intercourse rather than public performance as the arena of normative morality; to the interpersonal phenomenon of conversation rather than the personal act of spectatorship. For it is precisely the phenomenon of social intercourse on which Hume would attempt to model his account of social morality in Book III (“Of Morals”). Here, Hume offers a far more nuanced account of the relations between individual sentiments and the society’s moral norms than that afforded by spectator theory:

[T]ho’ sympathy be much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and a sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous; yet we neglect all these differences in our calm judgements concerning the characters of men. . . . The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters of manners. (603)

While our moral propensities may be innate, our moral standards derive from “the intercourse of sentiments” within society. By acknowledging the role of society in shaping an individual’s moral judgements, Hume undermines a strict distinction between individual morals and normative morality. Furthermore, normative morality is not conceptualized, as with Hutcheson, as an aggregate of individual moral responses, but rather as the totality of moral converse within a society.

Hume’s shift from a spectator theory to what we might call a “conversation” theory, ostensibly designed to offer a more flexible account of the relationship between individual judgements and social norms, acknowledges that the commensurability of judgements and norms is rarely absolute. Hypocrisy, for Hume, can be explained by the tendency for social norms to dominate individual judgements: “And tho’ the heart does not always take part with those general notions, or regulate its love and hatred by them, yet are they sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools” (603). In addition to hypocrisy, Hume’s scruple introduces the bleak phantasm of a society whose moral discourse is wholly alienated from the moral judgements of its members. With Hume, the absolute-
ness of a “moral sense”—Shaftesbury’s unelaborated conviction that innate moral responses serve as the foundation of a public morality—falls to the possibility of a public morality “sufficient for discourse” but sensed by no one. Such a fantasy makes Hume’s engagement with the Shaftesburian “moral sense” seem almost nugatory, beside the point of his inquiry into moral conversation.

Hume’s skepticism merely states in an extreme form the perennial ethical objection to moral sense philosophy: its moral relativism. Even before Hume theorized moral conversation, Enlightenment moralists used metaphors to secure the moral sense against charges of relativism—used metaphors, that is, to do the work of argument.19 Hutcheson, for example, conceptualizes moral approbation not as a cognitive function, but as an expressive one. Among a particular society’s variegated moral signifiers—for example, terms like “virtue,” “heroism,” “judgment,” “justification,” “motivation,” etc.—the approbation (or disapprobation) supplied by an innate moral sense functions as the transcendental signified to which these terms refer. While Hutcheson gives center stage to spectator theory, his implicit semiotics of morals suggests an awareness of moral conversation as a moving social force.

Conversation, for that matter, is only one way in which Hume renders the “intercourse of sentiments”; when he writes about the phenomenon of sympathy, his metaphor changes from conversation to “contagion[41]:

The passions are so contagious that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts... [M]y heart catches the same passion, and is warm’d by those warm sentiments, that display themselves before me. Such agreeable movements must give me an affection to every one that excites them. (605)

In this passage, Hume’s metaphor of contagion implicitly revives the ancient figure of the social body. While Hume assigns sympathy neither an etiology nor a teleology, he is insistent on its propensity to circulate; the “human breast” cannot resist it, nor can it prevent the transmission of sympathy to others. Tears, which “naturally start in our eyes” are symptomatic of the “excitation” and “movement” of our affections; the very perception of another’s tears conveys the fever of “warm sentiments” to the observer’s heart, which “catches the same passion.” Metaphorizing sympathy as contagion, of course, bespeaks a stoical alignment of passions with moral corruption—or might, from the pen of a writer other than Hume, famous in his own day for acquitting the passions against just such stoical aspersions.20 But Hume’s metaphor—with its emphasis on social circulation and its whiff of corruption—strikingly
anticipates Adam Smith’s account of sympathy in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith succeeds, where his predecessors failed, in providing a secular basis for morals beyond the “human breast.”

**Adam Smith and the Tribute of Sympathy**

Smith elaborates Hume’s theory of sympathy by describing it as an imaginative act:

Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality. We blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour; because we cannot help feeling with what confusion we ourselves should be covered, had we behaved in so absurd a manner.21

While Hume had observed that “indifference and insensibility” on the part of a sufferer increases our compassion, Smith analyzes this intensified response as a function of “put[ting] ourselves in his case.” Sympathy does not consist, then, in having an affection identical to that of the sufferer; nor does it depend on the intensity of our resemblance to the sufferer. For Smith, sympathy derives from a feeling of dissonance between ourselves and the sufferer’s situation; according to Smith, we do not imagine being that particular sufferer, but rather imagine being ourselves in the sufferer’s situation. Smith’s examples: the boor, because indifferent to propriety, will be unembarrassed whereas we would blush; the madman, having lost reason, will be “insensible” to his situation, whereas we “regard it with [our] present reason and judgment”; the infant, “knowing no future,” cries for the agony of disease, whereas the mother cries with fear for “the unknown consequences.”

Smith’s fourth and most emphatic example—the dead—exemplifies what Alan Bewell has called “empiricist thanatology”: “[T]he key to all our metaphors for death,” writes Bewell, “the material substratum from which they all fundamentally derive, is to be found in what we see happening to or what we do with the bodies of the dead.”22 Smith, similarly, claims that in contemplating the dead, we put aside metaphysics in favor of our observations:

We sympathize even with the dead, and overlooking what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can
have no influence upon their happiness. It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity. (1:11)

Not confining himself, however, to “those circumstances which strike our senses,” Smith imagines his own “dissolution,” what he would sense in the position of the dead. Smith’s example of sympathizing with the dead crucially reinscribes as self-sacrifice the self-interest on which sympathy is based. Self-interest, an idea Shaftesbury strove to banish from the discourse of morals is now seen to lie at the heart of sympathy. In Gray’s *Elegy*, for example, the fearsome fantasy of lying in a “narrow cell” beneath a “mould’ring heap” would yield a productive identification with the dead, a social identity designed to absorb and comfort the solitary mourner.

In sympathizing with the dead, then, we take up our place, imaginatively, in the grave. At the same time, the dead take up their places within our minds; we become, in Gray’s apposite words, “mindful” of them. As the bodies of the dead tend to decompose, so, according to empiricist thanatology, do our ideas of the dead. Since, Smith asserts, there is no way in which we can remediate the situation of the corpse, we strive through continuous sympathy “artificially to keep alive” the idea of the dead:

The tribute of our fellow-feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body; and, by the vain honours which we pay to their memory, we endeavour, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune. That our sympathy can afford them no consolation seems to be an addition to their calamity; and to think that all we can do is unavailing, and that, what alleviates all other distress, the regret, the love, and the lamentations of their friends, can yield no comfort to them, serves only to exasperate our sense of misery. The happiness of the dead, however, most assuredly, is affected by none of these circumstances; nor is it the thought of these things which can ever disturb the profound security of their repose. The idea of that dreary and endless melancholy, which the fancy naturally ascribes to their condition, arises altogether from our joining to the change which has been produced upon them, our own consciousness of that change; from our putting ourselves in their situation, and from our lodging, if I may be allowed to say so, our own living souls, in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case. (1:11–12)
Paradoxically, the very “payment” of “tribute of our fellow-feeling” “doubly due” the dead, compounds their “misfortune” by “afford[ing]” them no consolatory “yield.” Smith acknowledges that we cannot fully account for our sense of a “debt” to the dead by a meliorative motive, for we feel indebted to them in the full knowledge that our tribute brings the particular dead person no benefit.

I would suggest that Smith’s sense of an unpayable debt to the dead reflects his conviction that the debt to the dead is not confined to the solitary sympathizer, but is rather distributed among the members of society at large. Smith, by using economic metaphors to figure sympathy for the dead, revises Hume’s conversation theory of morals—itself a revision of Hutcheson’s spectator theory—into a theory of moral circulation. Such a theory, I would argue, is presaged by Hume’s metaphor of sympathy circulating within the social body. Smith’s sympathetic mourner bent over the grave provides an originary moment for Hume’s metaphor of contagion; taken together, the two figures of sympathy remind us that we catch something when we mourn at the grave—if not corruption, then a sympathetic twinge of death. For Smith, the dead communicate to the living a certain moral responsiveness that is, in turn, communicated to others.

In the fourth chapter of the first volume of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith provides an analysis of moral “conversation” as an exchange of sympathies between persons. The deep passions of grief, Smith maintains, threaten to make “conversation” itself impossible:

[I]f you have . . . no indignation at the injuries I have suffered . . . we can no longer converse upon these subjects. We become intolerable to one another. I can neither support your company, nor you mine. You are confounded at my violence and passion, and I am enraged at your cold insensibility and want of feeling.(1:33)

Having redefined the “natural,” affective sympathy of moral sense philosophy as a function of the imagination, Smith now, somewhat surprisingly, represents the imagination’s inclination to failure when faced with the strong passions of grief. And where sympathy fails between individuals, Smith cautions, they become positively repellent toward one another.

What prevents this fracturing of society in the face of great grief is the grieving person’s recognition of sympathy’s value to afford relief. To the end of securing such sympathy, he counter-sympathizes with the perplexed spectators of grief:

He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of [grief’s] natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emo-
tions of those who are about him. What they feel will, indeed, always be, in some respects, different from what he feels, and compassion can never be exactly the same with original sorrow; . . . These two sentiments, however, may, it is evident, have such a correspondence with one another, as is sufficient for the harmony of society. (1:35–36)

Smith’s musical metaphors notwithstanding, he offers here an analysis of moral conversation as an exchange of sympathies between persons. The aggrieved individual, in order to secure the comfort of another’s sympathy, imagines himself in the situation of the onlooker, an act that mutes his passion. The imagination of the onlooker, then, need not be strained beyond its capacities in figuring the onlooker in the situation of the aggrieved. While the aggrieved receives a tranquilizing comfort, the onlooker receives, quite literally, a consideration from the aggrieved that enfranchises him in a social bond.25

Elsewhere, Smith links these sympathies, respectively, to the complementary virtues of sensibility and amiability.26 But in this context, individual virtue is secondary to the promotion of the “harmony of society.” Smith’s implication of social harmony in this act of moral conversation suggests a link between the scene of mourning—a sympathy with the dead—and the subsequent scene of sympathy between persons. More specifically, Smith’s casting of both scenes as incidents of economic transaction shifts Hume’s metaphor of moral conversation toward a metaphor of moral circulation. The mourner at the grave is merely one point in a network of emotional exchanges which constitutes the moral circulation of a society. The dead, because they cannot be remediated—because they both evoke and warrant our feelings of “dreary and endless” melancholy—provide the gold standard for the endlessly circulating currency of sympathy which constitutes a normative morality. For Smith, the moral authority of the dead, not of a transcendental God nor of the individual human body, “guarantees” the social circulation of sympathy, pity, compassion, approbation, and censure by which the living regulate their actions.

I want to argue that Smith’s moral economy,27 by theorizing relations between the sympathies of individuals and the harmony of a society, not only addresses a primary problem within Enlightenment moral philosophy; it simultaneously addresses a crisis in the socioeconomic sphere: the crisis of public confidence caused by the proliferation of paper money. Smith’s consideration of money in Book II of The Wealth of Nations (1776) worries over precisely this issue. Just as sympathy transmutes the dead into a vital moral resource, paper money has the power to “convert this dead stock [of gold and silver currency] into active and productive stock; into materials to work upon, into tools to work with, and into
provisions and subsistence to work for; into stock which produces something both to himself and to his country.” 28 This “conversion,” however, is more properly a liberation or dispersal of hard currency into ventures abroad, which greatly diminishes the security of domestic markets. The vast network of credit within Britain, whose economy, as Linda Colley notes, was more dependent on credit than that of any of its competitors, 29 converged on the twin issues of social harmony and public confidence. Colley understands the credit system to have been a promoter of domestic peace:

All credit systems rely on confidence, confidence that interest payments will be made at the correct level and at the correct time, and confidence that debts will ultimately be repaid. So however much they disliked particular administrations, creditors and many of their clients were likely to regard any serious breach of the peace with alarm. 30

And with good reason, for the credit system left Britain peculiarly vulnerable to any tremor in the social body that would threaten confidence in the circulating paper currency. Smith’s fantasy of the dead as the moral debtor of the nation—like the Bank of England, a “great engine of the state”—provides the nation’s morality with a backing that is fixed in the native soil, that is not to be dispersed in foreign speculations.

To push the analogy further—and to refer Smith’s theory of sympathy to the literary practice of his contemporaries—we find a parallel between paper currency and the proliferating texts through which sympathy circulates at mid-century; for such texts, in order to place the moral resources of the nation into circulation—in order, that is, to be credited as both sympathetic and worthy of the reader’s sympathy—demand a certain confidence in their authority. This difficulty, I grant, goes unresolved within Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments. But Smith’s economic remedy for an analogous difficulty within the sphere of banking has resonance for the career of sympathy in the second half of the century.

In The Wealth of Nations, Smith claims a direct relationship between public confidence and the visibility of hard currency in circulation. For Smith, the greatest nuisance to the credit system is the activity of “beggarly bankers” issuing small notes of dubious value. To counter this danger, he advocates disallowing bank notes smaller than five pounds, the result of which will be the maintenance of gold and silver coins in circulation. The visibility of such coins, even in small denominations, would promote confidence in the edifice of credit. What Smith argues for in the economic sphere has ramifications in the moral sphere, for it suggests that an overextended system of credit—whether overextended by trivial bank notes or by trivial elegies—incurs the dangers of relativism.
and, eventually, bankruptcy. Smith’s admonition to keep small coins in circulation suggests the importance, at once, of a national dead and a local dead; of the circulation of texts of unspecified grief circulating among the graveyard poems of Blair, Hervey, Young, and Warton; and of the simultaneous transmission of sympathies through literature and the accessibility of the dead to citizens of small literary means. The continuities between Smith’s theory of morals and his theory of money are highly suggestive; both hinge on nothing less than the endurance of society. For Smith, the notion of a moral economy was not a neat metaphor for a self-enclosed system, but rather a vision of morals and economics as interpenetrating systems, alternative accounts of the vitality of the social organism. If morals could be described as the interested exchange of sympathies, then by the same token, the fate of the nation’s money could be seen to rest on its moral homogeneity.

With Adam Smith we find the culmination of the philosophical trends we have been tracing in this chapter: The turn in moral philosophy from tragedy and epic to popular and feminine literary forms such as the romance and the graveyard meditation; the empiricist search for a guarantor of moral culture; the attempt to generalize from a theory of moral conversation to a theory of moral circulation. But Smith is a crucial figure for this study not simply because he resolves a major philosophical problem of the first half of the century, but also because, more than any other Enlightenment thinker in Britain, he understood the increasing centrality of mourning and sympathy to be inextricably tied to the prosperity—indeed, to the identity—of the nation.

The moral liquidity ensured by tears, of course, had its cost in human felicity; the dead, in their nearness, would press upon the living. Fifty years after Shaftesbury discredited the Christian God’s “large recompense” as a “bargain of interest,” Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* commends death—for Smith, the premonition of being dead—as the guardian and protector of society:

> It is from this very illusion of the imagination, that the foresight of our own dissolution is so terrible to us, and that the idea of those circumstances, which undoubtedly can give us no pain when we are dead, makes us miserable while we are alive. And from thence arises one of the most important principles in human nature, the dread of death, the great poison to the happiness, but the great restraint upon the injustice of mankind; which, while it afflicts and mortifies the individual, guards and protects the society. (1:12)

In *Tristram Shandy*, which began to appear during the same year as Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Sterne familiarly calls death the “debt to nature,” an ancient locution revived by a society which knew
the ledger of its debt to death. As I will argue next, Smith’s sense of the grave as the source of moral life parallels Gray’s inquiry into the nature of virtue within the graveyard framework of the Elegy; by mid-century mourning and morals stood together at the grave.

Their Artless Tale

To borrow the idioms that have developed from the preceding discussion of moral philosophy, a spectator theory of morals would be sufficient to account for the experience of Pope’s elegist; Gray, however, writes an elegy whose “plot” is the transformation of moral spectatorship into moral circulation. Gray’s achievement is to generalize the elegy’s concerns by insisting on the interpenetration of individual moral experience and the morals of culture more generally.

In Gray’s day, few texts circulated as often and as widely as the Elegy. Having been liberally shared by Walpole while still in manuscript, it was precipitately published by Gray when a magazine he disdained sought to print it. Compared favorably to Lycidas, it saw five editions in its first year of publication (1751) and some seven more by 1763; anthologized and translated into Latin, it was reprinted by several periodicals. In his Life of Gray, Johnson famously summed up its popularity—“The Churchyard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo”—taking the occasion to define the common reader as “those uncorrupted with literary prejudices . . . the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning” (470). Commonly admired, it was admired by the “common,” and revered for addressing what was common to all its readers: not their mortal fate, but their propensity to be moved by the fate of others. With Johnson, as with so many readers, the Elegy was popular not least of all for being popular. I agree with Henry Weinfeld that “the question of popularity is in a sense thematized in the poem” but in the present context, I look beyond what Weinfeld calls the “fame-anonymity dialectic” to examine the problematic “thee” who is said to be “mindful of the unhonoured dead” in line 93. To anticipate my conclusion, the Elegy’s popularity remains an ironic comment on its own thematics of circulation, about which the poem turns at line 93, and toward which it is profoundly and perspicaciously ambivalent.

As we turn from morals back to mourning, it is worth pausing over the poem’s title. In the Eton manuscript, as is well known, the poem is entitled “Stanza’s Wrote in a Country Church-Yard.” The word “elegy” appears nowhere in this manuscript; the original version of line 82 (“The place of fame and elegy supply”) read “epitaph” for elegy. In his
Memoirs, Mason claimed to have suggested the title, noting that both alternate-rhyme meter (used by Hammond in his Love Elegies of 1742) and its graveyard matter rendered the poem “peculiarly fit” as an elegy. Whether Shenstone’s sober elegies, circulating in manuscript well before their 1764 publication, were in Mason’s mind is debatable, but the fact is that by 1751, Trapp’s and Shenstone’s desire to establish the elegy as a decorous, reflective, meditative poem larger in scope than the funereal occasion had been realized, and a particular English metric form had become associated with it. It was this new sense of an elegy with which Mason, if his account is accurate, identified Gray’s “Stanza’s,” and to which Gray was willing to attach his poem upon publication. In light of this fact, it becomes easier to distinguish Gray’s poem from the graveyard meditation, typically written in meters other than alternate-rhymed quatrains (or, in the case of Hervey’s Meditations, in prose). Whether in fact Gray’s poem has much more than iconography and moral seriousness in common with the graveyard meditation of the 1740s is open to debate. Let us consider two points of comparison between Gray’s Elegy and Hervey’s widely read Meditations (1746). First, while Hervey uses the dead to urge his readers to “[consider] their latter end” and become virtuous, Gray uses sympathy for the dead as a means to speculate about virtue. Second, whereas Hervey tours the graveyard, providing exemplary or cautionary narratives about each of the interred, Gray emphasizes the speculative nature of his thoughts about the dead, who remain types, not individuals; each speculation rapidly shifts into the mode of moral generalization. In short, the graveyard meditation typically enshrines melancholy within the firm framework of Christian eschatology, but Gray’s Elegy both refuses to fetishize melancholy and refuses to admit a Christian telos.

As if to exhibit these facts, Gray begins his poem during the final moments of the pastoral day. While Lycidas substitutes a rapt vision of heavenly brilliance for the gloom of night, and even Pope begins his elegy with a gloomy vision, Gray allows the gloom to gather like a film across the eye. The famous zeugma of line four—“to darkness and to me”—signals an identification of self and darkness; like the dead, the elegist has “Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day” (87). By passing from day into night, however, the elegist identifies not with death, but with mortality, with the necessity of making this passage. In its opening stanzas, the poem repeats this passage several times:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

The “darkness” of line four gives way to “the glimmering landscape”; the “solemn stillness” of line six gives way to “droning” and “tinkling” before subsiding into the owl’s complaint; while the dead are “for ever laid” to rest, their “sleep” gives way to “The breezy call of incense-breathing morn.” An inventory of Gray’s allusions to both L’Allegro and Il Penseroso is unnecessary here, but I would insist that by linking and interspersing such allusions, Gray allegorizes the two temperaments as successive phases of existence. Only by having assimilated the pleasures of mirth does one earn the right to deep melancholy at the thought of mortality. Gray’s Elegy, by repeating that passage from light to darkness, day to night, mirth to melancholy, begins by distancing its own meditative rhetoric from the cult of melancholy—or at very least, by reinterpreting melancholy as a masculine topos.39

For gender, as always in the poetics of elegy, provides a crucial nuance: the elegist, in other words, is not meditating for the sake of “divinest Melancholy,” Milton’s Goddess “sage and holy,” but for the sake of the “rude forefathers of the hamlet.” Like the sweet prince named in this line, the elegist’s melting sorrow is framed by his participation in, rather than exemption from, patriarchy.40 The “rude forefathers” differ from the traditional elegiac object—a youthful male poet—in three ways: they are multiple, unlettered, and associated with previous generations. Whereas Hervey refers to the dead as a “congregation,” emphasizing their affiliation with the nearby church, Gray’s perspective is predominantly secular, concerned less with “anthem” than with “annals.”
Under his speculative eye come their labor, their domestic joys and burdens; seeing more figuratively and more deeply, he surveys their potential for heroic ambition, leadership, conflict, debate, revolution, economic stewardship, “noble rage,” poetic genius, ruthlessness, pride, and guilt. Their piety goes unconsidered. The allegorical personifications of Ambition, Grandeur, Honour, and Flattery are out of place here partly because they appear in the wrong register; that they flock to this Churchyard suggests the numinous vacuum which, a century later, Victorian stonemasons would populate with angels. The elegist identifies with the dead not because he fears for their souls, and not only because he shares their mortal destiny, but because he identifies his society as the heir to theirs. Written by a man whom Johnson introduces as “the son of Mr. Philip Gray, a scrivener of London,” the Elegy expresses an idealized relationship to the dead which seeks to enlarge the idea of a cultural inheritance beyond class and local boundaries. Despite generations of scholars who have attempted to specify a historical churchyard in or about which the Elegy was written, Gray has kept it—and himself—unnamed with good reason: the sense of duty evoked in these stanzas is not a function of locality, but rather of a cultural identity here epitomized (but not exhausted) by the community constellated around the country church. Whereas Pope’s expended tear signifies the poet’s charity for a distressed ghost, here the “passing tribute of a sigh” constitutes the fulfillment of a civic duty.

And yet, in lines 81–97, it is the tenuousness of this connection that Gray emphasizes—not the dutiful tribute, but the passing sigh. Having already indicated the pompous futility of “storied urn or animated bust,” Gray reveals the pathetic reductiveness of the “uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture”:

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e’er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev’n from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
Ev’n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

(81–92)
Precisely when Gray altered the word “epitaph” in line 82 to “elegy” is difficult to say, but the substitution signals a concrete sense of elegiac textuality and suggests that, with Gray, the elegy had come at last within striking distance of the public virtues. Whereas Trapp considered the literatures of fame (i.e., epic and tragedy) and elegy antithetical, and Shenstone found them dialectical, Gray associates them metonymically: “Fame and elegy” alike are unavailable to the rustic dead, who are “strewn” about with didactic “holy text[s].” Bearing merely names (perhaps misspelled) and numerals, the stones pathetically constitute “the short and simple annals of the poor”; their very inadequacy to provide a link to the “rude forefathers” itself implores “the passing tribute of a sigh.” Similarly, the dying depend on the tenuous reliability of “some fond breast,” and can be certain only of an uncertain number of tears—“some pious drops.”

Whether the stanzas before us forge a more sturdy link to the dead than those stones and these tears, is the question. By relating “their artless tale,” the elegist has related us both to himself, but more urgently, to the dead; the famous crux of line 93 may perhaps be understood as the figural collapse of those relationships in a spectacular performance of sympathy. Having become literally “mindful” of the dead, we imaginatively fuse with the sympathetic teller of their artless tale, and, in so doing, find that we have joined the dead:

For thee who, mindful of the unhonoured dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy fate,
Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
“Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
“Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
“To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.
“There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
“That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
“His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
“And pore upon the brook that babbles by.
“Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
“Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,
“Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
“Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.
“One morn I missed him on the customed hill,
“Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
“Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
“Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;
“The next with dirges due in sad array
“Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.”

(93–114)

Like Smith, Gray understands sympathy as an imaginative act; as such, sympathy is autonomous and self-authorized. While the fragility of sympathy has already been made clear, it is only by placing ourselves in the grave that we understand the possible ironies of sympathy. Hence, the same poet who begins by distancing himself from the cult of melancholy, is recalled as a melancholic madman, muttering and babbling; the same poet who “in these lines” boldly links the rustics’ furrow and the paths of glory alike to the grave is described as “wayward”; the same poet whose moral experience extends beyond the boundaries of locality and class is described as “crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.” Sympathy becomes caricature as the poetic moralist becomes an effusive, mad solipsist.

The epitaph, by attaching the poet’s career to the dictates of “holy text,” merely redoubles the injuries of sympathy.

Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown,
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heaven did a recompence as largely send:
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gained from Heaven (‘twas all he wished) a friend.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.

(117–28)

Here, the poet’s sympathy for the “unhonoured dead” earns him a share in their “destiny obscure.” Declining to characterize him by either his merits or his frailties, the epitaph fails to remember him as a poet; in stone, he is a maker not of verse but of tears. Instead, the epitaph traces the poet’s deliverance from the false goddess of melancholy to a masculine deity: “his Father and his God.” Having been “marked” by Melancholy, the poet is generously depicted as passively enthralled, rather than culpable of idolatry. The stilted diction of “bounty” and “recompence,”
giving and gaining, returns us from the idiom of civic circulation to that of Christian compensation. In Pope’s “Elegy,” the poet’s tear signifies his generous assumption of heaven’s unpaid debt to the Lady; here, the friend bestowed by heaven signifies a divine assumption of the world’s unpaid debt to the sympathetic poet. Finally, the abode that transcends local and class boundaries is not that of the nation, but that of heaven; the dead poet abides with “his Father and his God” instead of with the “rude forefathers.” Ironically, Gray’s Elegy concludes by showing how easily a philosophy of sympathy may revert into an affirmation of the Christian doctrine of heavenly recompense—the very moral impasse that prompted Shaftesbury to theorize a moral sense. A testament to grace, the epitaph is not a poem so much as yet another strewn and holy text.

The profound influence of Gray’s Elegy on the poetry of the next seventy-five years, I would argue, is largely a legacy of its first two dozen stanzas. As I will show, these stanzas extended the elegy’s reach beyond the private virtues to embrace the public virtues as well; by expanding the object of the poet’s sympathy from the unconscious dead to the self-conscious mortal, it replaced the notion of an elegiac occasion with that of an elegiac predicament, anticipating the Coleridgean dialectic between “life-in-death” and “death-in-life.” Both John Newbery, author of Art of Poetry (1762) and the anonymous author of “An Essay on Elegies,” published in the Annual Register for 1767, credit Gray’s Elegy with earning a new respect and distinction for the elegy; for Newbery, the Elegy is simply “one of the best that has appeared in our language, and may be justly esteemed as a masterpiece.” The influence of a certain strain in Gray’s Elegy would be felt most profoundly not in poetry, but in British anti-Jacobin politics: Burke’s “philosophic analogy” between “the constitution of our country” and “our dearest domestic ties,” and his conceit of English society as “a permanent body composed of transitory parts” are both richly anticipated by the spectacle of Gray’s elegist contemplating the graves of the “rude forefathers of the hamlet.”

The poem’s closing stanzas, however, expose the failure of sympathy to produce a rhetoric that will on the one hand relate the individual to the community and, on the other, maintain the individual within the community. Once the poet stages the performance of sympathy by substituting the dead poet for the “rude forefathers” at the center of the poem, the evidence is far more dubious about the notion of sympathy as the moral liquidity of a society. The swain’s recollection and the closing epitaph provide two alternative rhetorics of sympathy, each of which
caricatures the alienation between the individual mourner and the culture at large. The swain, however sympathetic to the young poet, mistakes his sober musings for unintelligible ravings, his philosophical and political meditations for erotic pain. With the exception of line 109 (“One morn I missed him,“) the swain speaks in the first person plural, as though speaking on behalf of the community; the youth frequents neither village, nor churchyard, but the nodding beeches, babbling brooks, woods, hills, heaths, trees, rills, and lawns that afford him a desired solitude. At home in nature, he exists at the margins of culture. Only in death does he rejoin the community centered on the church, his waywardness corrected by the “church-way path” down which he is borne. While the swain’s words caricature the effusive poetry of melancholy, they also caricature the community’s anxiety about this eccentric and wayward rhetoric, for the effusive, melancholic poet and the pious, narrow community are antithetical. The epitaph, on the other hand, relates the consequences of surrendering melancholic eccentricity to the centricity of inherited culture. Once buried in the churchyard, the youth’s memory is awkwardly lashed to the “holy texts” strewn among the gravestones. The epitaph, by generalizing the youth’s origins, predicament, and destiny, transforms his memory into a cultural artifact.

At mid-century, Gray’s *Elegy* defines an uneasy and precarious position for the elegy between the marginalized rhetoric of the effusion and the traditional rhetoric of the epitaph. In so doing, it anticipates two competing strategies for authorizing elegiac poetry that will emerge in the second half of the century: on the one hand, defending the representation of grief by appeal to the cult of sincerity, and on the other, defending the elegiac text by appeal to its epitaphic, documentary affinities. The next major development in literary mourning—the elegiac sonnets of the 1780s and 1790s—would attempt to exploit as authorizing strategies the two rhetorical positions that for Gray represent the ironies of sympathy.