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Abstract

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This article takes as its starting point a remarkable account of childbirth in the memoirs of a seventeenth-century Yorkshire gentlewoman, Alice Thornton. Her representation of the agony of her labour exemplifies the key structuring motif of her memoirs as a whole: the 'providentialist' pairing of danger and deliverance. The article aims to relate this passage to that textual context and to the broader cultural and social contours of Alice Thornton's world. Alice succeeded in giving eloquent words to the experience of extreme physical pain. Her words speak to us down the centuries, immediate and compelling. But this utterly personal, corporeal experience is culturally mediated. In order to understand her suffering, Alice Thornton drew on contemporary 'discourses of martyrdom', where pain could be understood as a test of faith and endurance from which she emerged strengthened, purified, reaffirmed, by God. Alice was pious and dutiful: her sense of duty and her faith motivated her to write, to record for posterity the proofs of God's power and mercy. But her writings, recording her perils and deliverances, also became the proofs of her virtue, a source of godly authority as well as identity.

**Imagining the pain and peril of seventeenth-century childbirth:
travail and deliverance in the making of an early modern world¹**

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It pleased God, in much mercy, to restore me to strength to goe to my full time, my labour begining three daies; but upon the Wednesday, the ninth of December, I fell into exceeding sharpe travill in great extreamity, so that the midwife did beleive I should be delivered soone. But loe! it fell out contrary, for the childe staid in the birth, and came crosse with his feete first, and in this condition contineued till Thursday morning betweene two and three a clocke, at which time I was upon the racke in bearing my childe with such exquisitt torment, as if each lime weare divided from other, for the space of two houers; when att length, beeing speechlesse and breathlesse, I was, by the infinnitt providence of God, in great mercy delivered.²

Alice Thornton's accounts of the pains and perils of childbirth, including this passage on the birth of her fifth child, have attracted the attention of a number of recent historians as particularly detailed and evocative examples of personal testimony to the experience of giving birth in the early modern period.³ Much of this historiography has centred upon what Adrian Wilson, criticizing the tendency 'to combine pain, danger, and the fears of these into a single gestalt', has described as the 'fear thesis'.⁴ Moreover, Alice Thornton's accounts of childbirth are often extracted out of context, obscuring the memoir's narrative construction on the 'providential' themes of danger, trial and deliverance. I shall argue, however, that a fuller understanding of this remarkable source for seventeenth-century childbirth demands careful examination of these narrative structures and consideration of their wider cultural context. Without the trials of pain, fear, danger, there could be no consequent 'deliverance', no divine mercy to celebrate. Secondly, I shall pay close attention to the language of this particular description of bodily suffering, the culturally-mediated way in which an experience so corporeal and interior is imagined and represented.⁵ Finally, I shall explore the theme of 'providence' and its significance for Alice Thornton's writing during the course of her life.

Introduction

Wilson identifies a 'spectrum of views from optimism to pessimism' in the recent historiography of childbirth, in which the predominant view would hold that 'women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were racked by fears of giving birth'. Sara Mendelson, for example, argues that 'sociable childbed gatherings... became a means of equitably distributing [the mother's] terror to the rest of her female acquaintance'; the support and prayers of other women are viewed by Linda Pollock as 'a much needed psychological prop' for terrified mothers, their fears 'fuelled' by knowledge of scenes of childbed horror and by printed prayers that 'dwell on the suffering and dangers of birth'.⁶ However, Roger Schofield's careful statistical analysis estimates that an early modern woman's risk of dying in childbed was six to seven per cent during her entire 'procreative career', much higher than today but less hazardous than some accounts imply (and not very different from her chances of dying of other causes between pregnancies). But moving from statistics to *attitudes* and emotions is not at all straightforward. Schofield draws a comparison with current infant mortality levels, which are similar to the early modern maternal mortality estimates: modern parents are aware of the possibility, but do not live in constant terror of it happening to them.⁷ But one could equally, in contrast, highlight the disparity between intense fears amongst modern parents of attacks by strangers upon their children and the 'real' (statistical) occurrence of such violence.

Wilson strongly argues the need for a more carefully nuanced historiography of the attitudes of early modern mothers. Closer examination of personal accounts during pregnancies, he suggests, indicates feelings that were complex and far from uniform; recorded fears are frequently 'intelligible as responses to specific, temporary occasions' such as illness or a difficult labour.⁸ Besides, early modern mothers did not know of Schofield's (generalized) statistics and, moreover, they could have no idea that the risks would dramatically contract several hundred years in the future; we need to beware the pitfalls of hindsight. Discussing another set of maternal 'fears' – those concerning 'monstrous' births – Herman Roodenburg also calls for less reductionist analyses of early modern 'fears', paying more attention to reconstructing 'the "cognitive map" in which these fears were embedded'.⁹ Stuart Clark has criticized historical approaches to early modern

popular culture that ‘reduce the utterances of an age to empirical statements which can be falsified in terms of some subsequent and single standard of rationality’:

Those psychological traits – anxiety, fearfulness, aggressiveness – which supposedly characterized popular behaviour cannot now be accepted as the product of any general material or mental failings if every one of the agents in question was (necessarily) unaware of them. For us to speak of peasants sensing their predicament we would have to indicate some positive body of knowledge and techniques of which they themselves felt the lack.¹⁰

Clark’s argument is equally relevant to early modern mothers. Modern assumptions are that childbirth *ought* to be safe and relatively easy; pain is to be relieved by drugs (or even, according to proponents of ‘natural’ childbirth, the right state of mind); sophisticated medical techniques reduce the risks of ‘difficult’ births (and higher standards of hygiene prevent formerly dangerous infections). Yet, whether influenced by medical discourse or by the ‘natural’ childbirth movement, Tess Cosslett reminds us that these assumptions ‘are cultural products of particular historical moments’.¹¹ Undoubtedly, early modern women *sometimes* feared childbirth, and with reason: it could indeed be a dangerous, as well as tremendously painful, experience. But that is not the same as suggesting that fear was the overriding characteristic, the norm, of early modern women’s experiences of pregnancy – as they helplessly waited for modern medicine to deliver them from their perils.¹² Then as now, their emotions were complex, shifting, mixed, individual experiences, an ongoing ‘struggle between hope and fear’.¹³

This is, it should be emphasized, a study of the ‘particular’; Alice Thornton is not intended to stand as a representative of seventeenth-century English women. Born in 1626, she belonged to the Yorkshire gentry;¹⁴ her father, Christopher Wandesford, was cousin to the Earl of Strafford and became Lord Deputy of Ireland; the Thorntons were also a long-established Yorkshire gentry family.¹⁵ She was staunchly Royalist as well as being literate and deeply pious, the immediate context for the writing (and quite possibly the survival) of her memoirs.¹⁶ The language and powerful imagery of her account *are* familiar from many seventeenth-century sources. Alice Thornton was far from unique in drawing upon providentialist ‘discourses of martyrdom’, where physical sufferings could be understood as a test of faith and endurance, and the sufferer was

ultimately ‘delivered’, strengthened and purified. She expresses ideas that were widely shared, and as such her narrative seems to offer us wider insights into the particular meaning of those beliefs for experiences of childbirth.¹⁷ But I do not wish to conclude as a result that her experiences were ‘typical’; this is, rather, an effort to place one highly personal account in its cultural setting, to explore the influences that went into creating Alice Thornton’s understanding and writing of her labours, and the significance of her experiences in the making of her world.

Births, Deaths and Godly Sufferings

In 1645, Alice (as yet unmarried) witnessed the difficult delivery and subsequent mortal illness of her sister, Lady Danby.

This childe came double into the world, with such extreamity that she was exceedingly tormented with paines, so that she was deprived of the benefit of sleepe for fourteen daies, except a few frightfull slumbers; neither could she eate any thing for her nourishment as usual.¹⁸

A terrible and frightening experience for sufferer and onlookers alike, without a shadow of a doubt. For Alice, ‘[m]y greife and sorrow was soe great for her, that I had brought myself into a very weak condition’, and she writes movingly of the widespread grief expressed at her sister’s death. And yet, what stands out equally strikingly is a message of confidence and joyful expectation:

Sometimes she did express abundant joy in God, and would sweetely, with a melodious voice, sing aloud His praise and glory in anthems and psallmes proper for her condition, with many sweete verces praising Him for all things; nor was she in the least concerned to part with her husband or children, nor any thing in this world, having her hopes and desires fixed upon God.¹⁹

Several years later, while expecting her eighth child, Alice Thornton began to reflect on ‘that sad estate I was to passe, and dangerous pirills my soule was to find, even by the gates of death’, and did indeed become ‘terrified with my last extremity’. But what, exactly, were the perils that

she feared? Her anxieties may be seen as specific concerns about dying ‘badly’, as much as fear of death in itself. The godly aspired to a ‘good death’, with both worldly and spiritual affairs in order; they needed to overcome the anxiety that they might not be saved, through extensive preparation, prayer and praise. ‘The deathbed was seen as the supreme trial of faith.’²⁰ And this is what, as with her sister before her, Alice emphasizes:

I tribbled my diligence and caire in preparation, haveing with comfort received the blessed Sacrament as a pledge of my redemption... After this great mercy in the renewing of our vowes and covenants with God, I was fully satisfied in that condition, whether for life or death, haveing committed my soule in keepinge to a faithfull Meadiator and Redeemer, hoping for me to live is Christ and to die was gaine; when I should exchange sorrow for joy, and death for life and immortality.²¹

Lady Danby and Alice are both tested and respond in exemplary fashion, proving that they are good Christians, staunch in their faith and actions, fully submissive to God’s will. It is always possible, it should be noted, that the reality could have been less edifying than its retelling. The ideal of the good death, it has been pointed out, was not easy to live up to; it was rather more fragile than a memoir like Alice’s was likely to admit.²² Her accounts of the two episodes are not simply ‘pious fictions’, but nor are they transparent documents of personal experience; they are mediated by conventional ideals and expectations.²³

Certainly, preparing to die ‘well’ demanded activity. Apart from ministering to her soul, Alice busied herself ensuring that her children would be provided for, spiritually and materially, if her fears were to be realized. Indeed, it is the resilient manner in which Alice faced the possibility of death and dealt with her fears, drawing on the rituals and reassurances of her faith, rather than the ‘fear’ itself, that is ultimately the most striking feature of this passage. Similarly, Anne Bradstreet’s poem, ‘Before the birth of one of her children’, as Wilson notes, has been cited in support of the ‘fear thesis’, as Anne contemplates the possibility of her death in childbed. Yet her attitude, and her intent, is considerably more complex than that. The poem begins with quiet resignation:

All things within this fading world hath end,

Adversity doth still our joys attend;
No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet,
But with death's parting blow is sure to meet...

It is addressed directly to her husband, and is deeply concerned with what might happen after her premature death. The poem is *meant* to be affecting: it is an appeal to her husband's conscience. After all, she will have lost her life in bearing their child; while death is inevitable for all, childbirth for her may mean that 'I see not half my days that's due'. She warns him not to neglect their children ('my dear remains') and predicts that he will indeed forget her, unless her words can shame him into remembering:

And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honour my absent hearse;
And kiss this paper for thy love's dear sake,
Who with salt tears this last farewell did take.²⁴

If more careful consideration of both the text and the intended audience of this poem on the dangers of childbirth complicates our understanding of its meaning, re-placing it within the larger body of Anne's writing is also revealing. She was a woman accustomed to serious illness and bodily affliction, and this is not her only poem to view her death in a spirit of pious acceptance and faith:

O while I live this grace me give
I doing good may be,
Then death's arrest I shall count best
because it's Thy decree ...²⁵

Her sentiments parallel those of both Alice Thornton and her sister: the concern to live *and* die 'well'. Alice too wrote of the varied dangers, accidents and illnesses that she faced during her life, and it would be a mistake to view her childbirth narratives in isolation from these. Childbirth was a peril specific to women, but it was far from being the only hazard they faced. Indeed, it has been suggested that, for the godly, the pains and perils of birth and motherhood 'were simply examples

of the affliction of all humanity as the result of original sin'.²⁶ Such afflictions were sent by God, 'either to punish human wickedness or as a trial of faith'.²⁷ However, providential explanations did not exclude the use of medicine to relieve illness, any more than they prevented expectant mothers and midwives from doing their best to alleviate pain in labour; nevertheless, the efficacy of such 'means' depended on God's blessing. The physician and the midwife alike were His 'instruments', and while it was sinful to place too much faith in them alone, it was equally wrong to reject them or to fail to take good care of one's bodily health.²⁸

Nevertheless, of course, childbirth *did* differ from illness, and was fraught with its own dangers – and meanings. The 'pain and peril' of birth was for many explained, made comprehensible, through scripture.²⁹ The story of Eve is far from comforting, but, crucially, it did contain an overarching explanation for the physical suffering and danger mothers endured. As one prayer for a pregnant woman put it:

I acknowledge, O Lord, that justlie for our sinfull transgression of thy commandements, thou saiedst unto the first woman, our grand-mother Eve, and in hir to us all... All our paines therefore that we suffer in this behalfe, are none other thing, but a woorthie crosse laid upon us by thy godlie ordinance...³⁰

This did not conflict with physiological medical explanations in individual cases. Jane Sharp detailed a range of factors that affected how painful delivery might be, including age, prior health, the size, sex and positioning of the baby; Alice Thornton was certain that her torture in labour, and the baby's subsequent death, was due to him being 'turned wrong by the fall I gott in September' and the midwife's inability to 'turne him right'. But such immediate factors were viewed as 'secondary' causes; it was 'that curse that *God* laid upon our sex to bring forth in sorrow, that is the general cause and common to all'.³¹

Moreover, for the godly woman, the New Testament offered redemption for Eve's transgression: 'the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety'.³² Modern readers may find repellent the insistence on female subordination and the equation of femininity with maternity, reasserted so strongly by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. Yet such views

could foster a positive, powerful spiritual meaning for the traumatic experience of giving birth; Luther, after all, was rejecting ideas that childbirth was polluting and insisting on its saving grace.³³

Imagining Torture

Alice's use of the image of the rack, of the body enduring judicial torture, is an example of a Christian tradition of enduring physical pain that reaches back to Scripture, to the agonies of Christ on the cross, and forward through traditions of Christian martyrology powerfully reshaped during the English Reformation.³⁴ Images of torture – including, specifically, the rack – recur in seventeenth-century English writing across a variety of genres in prose, drama and poetry. Seventeenth-century women poets, for example, made use of the metaphor to describe both physical and mental sufferings: the torments of love, of illness, melancholy, and grief at the death of loved ones. Mary Chudleigh, for example, recalled the last sickness of her daughter, as 'Rack'd by Convulsive Pains she meekly lies / And gazes on me with imploring Eyes', and her own sorrow that 'I cannot with her in her Tortures share'.³⁵ Earlier in the century, Mary Wroth voiced the anguish of love and jealousy through her heroine Pamphilea:

Cruel Remembrance, alas now be still,
Put me not on the rack to torture me:
I do confess my greatest misery
Lives in your plenty, my last harm your skill...³⁶

The metaphor was used to notable effect in autobiographical religious writing. John Bunyan employed the imagery of racking torture in his spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding* to represent his spiritual agonies as he struggled to achieve grace: 'and sometimes also the Tempter would make me believe I had consented to [sell Christ], then should I be as tortured on a Rack for whole dayes together...'³⁷ As Knott comments, Bunyan's 'spiritual anguish seems unbearably intense because he renders it in bodily terms, as excruciating physical torment'.³⁸ An Collins, another woman who justified her writing in terms of the praise of God, used the imagery rather differently. She wrote of how she had in her youth suffered continuous 'cares' and pains, 'Whereat my minde it self, would much torment, / Upon the rack of restless discontent'. But faith and God's

grace finally brought her relief: ‘And God in mercy some refreshing send, / whereby I learn’d his goodnesse to admire’.³⁹

And, although early modern women rarely left detailed written accounts of their childbearing experiences, Alice Thornton was not alone in using such imagery to describe childbirth. Other mothers-to-be viewed the forthcoming birth as a trial, to be endured with the help of God. In her meditations, Elizabeth Egerton, Countess of Bridgewater, dwelt frequently and often at length on her pregnancies and labours in child-bed, and on ‘the great torture of childbirth’.⁴⁰ Writing during pregnancy, she would pray for divine mercy and aid in labour: ‘I beg of thee to have compassion on me in the great paine I am to feele in the bringing forth of this my Child, and I beseech thee lay no more on me then y^u wilt enable me to beare’. Subsequently, she wrote in thanksgiving: ‘to thee I give all prayse & thanks, that thou hast been pleased to deliver me out of the great paine of child-birth’.⁴¹

The ideas are also to be found in an earlier source, the prayers collected in Thomas Bentley’s *Fift Lamp of Virginitie* (also known as *The Monument of Matrones*). In their progress from early pregnancy to labour, the language deployed is striking in its vivid bodily imagery as well as its increasing intensity, reaching a climax in the special prayers for women in ‘long and sore labour’. It departs from the conventional pieties of most printed prayers, and even of the ‘personal’ writings of Alice Thornton or Elizabeth Egerton:

O come therefore unto me at the last, and comfort me; satisfie my longing to the full, and deliver thy faithfull hand-maid, and sorrowfull servant out of this extreame sorrowe, and easelesse paines, that I may no longer crie and saie, Why is my heavines continuall, and my paines so intollerable? How is it Lord, that for no intreatie thou wilt not deliver thine hand-maid from such indurable greefes? How long shall I suffer the paines of the birth, and the anguish of the travell? How long Lord shall my bowels thus sound like an harpe, my bones and sinewes be racked asunder, and mine inward parts be thus greevouslie tormented for my sins?⁴²

In this extremity, a woman can put aside both submissiveness and praise: ‘[t]ranscending supplication’, she boldly appropriates the language of scripture, of David and Job and, most audaciously of all, of Christ, by using and adapting Psalm 22 (known as ‘The complaint of Christ

upon the Cross'). Childbirth might bring pain, fear, death; but it also brought 'the highest spirituality a woman could enjoy'.⁴³ And adopting the language of martyrdom for the birthing chamber insisted on the essential godliness of giving birth.

It has been suggested that the language of the prayer in Bentley's collection, in its 'urgency and immediacy', may indicate that the writer, 'if not a woman, is at least a man who is sensitive to female experience'.⁴⁴ It is certainly in stark contrast with the bland pieties of, for example, the prayers collected by John Cosin.⁴⁵ However, the rack was hardly a physically 'immediate' experience for most of those, male or female, who used them in these varied genres of writing. As those extolling the virtues of English criminal justice against its continental equivalents often commented, the use of physical torture was not a feature of English law and was rarely employed.⁴⁶ Seventeenth-century English writers knew about it primarily through discursive representations of martyrdom; and one of their most powerful sources of images of torture endured and transcended was the monumental work of John Foxe.

Recent writing on the 'discourses of martyrdom' and on the figuring of martyred bodies in Foxe's work focuses primarily on the examinations and subsequent burnings of the Marian martyrs, with the burning body as a sacrificial offering, purified in the process. And Alice Thornton certainly knew and used this imagery, writing in a prayer of thanksgiving following the birth of her first child: 'Make this fire of affliction instrumentall to purge the drosse of all my sinns of negligencys, ignorances, and willfull transgressions, that I may come out like gold out of the furnish'.⁴⁷

Of particular interest here, however, Foxe also famously included the ordeal of a female body on the rack: the torture of Anne Askew in 1546. Within this general discursive context, Askew may have possessed a particular appeal as a feminine model for bravely enduring pain and suffering, a woman made strong by God and her faith.⁴⁸ Foxe reproduced her own, characteristically terse, account of her torture: 'Then they did put me on the racke... And because I laie still and did not crie, my lord chancellor and M. Rich, toke paines to racke me with their owne hands, till I was nigh dead'. To this was added a narrative that further emphasized the brutality of the torturers and the quiet courage of the martyr as her body was torn apart:

[The lord chancellor] and M. Rich throwing off their gowns would needs play the tormentors themselves: first asking her if she were with child. To whom she answering again said: ye shall not need to spare for that, but do your wils upon me: and so quietly and patiently praying unto the Lord, she abode their tyrannie, till hir bones and ioints almost were pluckt asunder, in such sort, as she was caried away in a chaire.

In her own account, Askew refused to be destroyed or silenced; she continued to debate with her torturers for two hours, sitting on the bare floor, before they gave up and allowed her to be carried away. Foxe went on to describe, in both text and image, the scene of her final martyrdom at the stake; she died, he thought, 'leaving behinde hir a singular example of christian constancie for all men to followe'.⁴⁹

As Janel Mueller points out, Foxe's accounts of Tudor martyrs represent 'triumphant makings on the part of the condemned heretics', a challenge to Elaine Scarry's powerful analysis of the 'structure of torture', in which the tortured person's pain is, inevitably, converted into the torturer's power.⁵⁰ As Knott argues, the martyrs demonstrate 'the limitations of the power of church or state to control the subversive spirit'; their 'pain becomes a source of enhanced spiritual power'.⁵¹ The resistance of the victims affirmed their truth, undermining the authority of the torturers. Nevertheless, Scarry does offer vital insights into strategies for verbalizing pain. She suggests that in efforts to describe the felt-experience of physical pain, two metaphors stand out: 'a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain' and 'bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain'.⁵² This 'language of agency' – though deeply unstable – is crucial in 'projecting' the internal experience of pain outwards into the world. Alice Thornton, it can be seen, employs both metaphors: 'I was upon the racke in bearing my childe, with such exquisitt torment, as if each lyme were divided from other'. Specificity, it should be noted, is vital: not just any torture but the particular instrument and its action on the body.⁵³ Further, the metaphorical rack and its tearing of limbs 'fit' the physical experience; in childbirth a woman's body in a very real sense is divided, split open.

Not surprisingly, images of splitting and being torn (or cut) apart remain a striking theme in the twentieth-century discourses of childbirth discussed by Tess Cosslett. However, the 'weapons' are very different: metallic mechanical images of saws and claws, steel hands, iron fingers. Moreover, she notes, such images are often associated with 'medical' births, with hospital delivery

rooms and operating tables; the idealistic imagery of ‘natural’ childbirth, such as opening flowers and seeds, is very different.⁵⁴ In twentieth-century representations, then, the pain of childbirth is frequently associated with the assaults of technology and institutions of power upon the human body and sense of self. In contrast, Alice Thornton embraced ‘the Marian protestant mode of identity-making, which proceeds by catalytic testing through bodily pain’.⁵⁵ Her pains could be understood as a test of her faith and endurance and a sign of God’s power and mercy, from which she emerged spiritually strengthened; by divine Providence, she had been ‘delivered’.

The discourses of martyrdom were wide-ranging and widely understood; their power in this particular context is not separable from that wider picture. Politically, their uses and meanings could not be constrained; during the seventeenth century they were just as likely to be appropriated by those resisting church and state authority as by those, like Alice Thornton, whose loyalty to church and monarchy is indisputable. After all, motherhood is not martyrdom: women in travail were not engaging in resistance to tyrannical authority. Yet they could appropriate this powerful and adaptable discourse of Christian suffering in the service of God and humanity.

The Politics of Deliverance

The pervasive influence, flexibility and varied uses of Providence in the seventeenth century have received attention from a number of historians.⁵⁶ Alexandra Walsham describes it as ‘an invisible prism’ that helped ‘to focus the refractory meanings of both petty and perplexing events’.⁵⁷ Mendelson points out that most of the surviving seventeenth-century women’s diaries and memoirs, displaying ‘the urge to impose some comprehensible order upon the fortuitous incidents that made up their lives’, were moulded by a providential interpretative framework.⁵⁸ Moreover, for mothers the ceremony of churching, with its opening declaration that ‘it hath pleased Almighty God of his goodness to give you safe deliverance, and hath preserved you in the great danger of childbirth’, would have been a familiar one.⁵⁹

However, what providentialism meant for the experience of childbirth, the particular significance of the vocabulary of deliverance in the delivery room (or vice versa), is less often discussed, even though, as David Cressy points out, this vocabulary frequently ‘linked public and private blessings’. One notable example occurred in 1605, when Queen Anne’s ‘safe deliverance’

in childbirth and England's deliverance from the Gunpowder Plot just a few months later were celebrated using exactly the same language.⁶⁰ God's hand was to be seen everywhere, directing the smallest occurrences in individuals' daily lives – 'linkes in the chaine of providences'⁶¹ – through to the fortunes of whole nations. Alice Thornton was one of many women and men who wrote to record and reveal the patterns that they perceived, in order to praise God:

For as much as it is the dutie of every true Christian to remember and take notice of Almighty God our Heavenly Father's gracious acts of Providence over them, and mercifull dealings with them... as also to keepe perticuler remembrances of His favours, both spirituall and temporall, together with His remarkable deliverances of their soules and bodies...⁶²

Providentialism connected the divine and earthly, the natural and supernatural, and soul to body. A high proportion of Alice Thornton's deliverances (including those in childbirth) are from physical dangers or illnesses; her first entry refers to a 'deliverance from death by a fall' at the age of three. (On the other hand, good health also demonstrates that 'His gracious eye of Providence' is watching her.)⁶³ Falls, infections, bad food, fire and water are just some of the more frequent perils. She is also delivered – twice – from a different kind of threat to her body and soul, receiving eleventh-hour warnings about soldiers who, frustrated in efforts to marry her, are plotting abduction and rape.⁶⁴ And, although this is rarer in the memoirs, the afflictions of those who have wronged her may be held up as a sign of divine punishment, even vengeance on her behalf. The only child of a woman who insulted and slandered her 'fell sick of the smalepox, like to have died of them, but only had them come forth all of one side of all the body from head to foote'; the child was cured, but then 'it broake out of the other side'. Shortly after this the mother herself fell mortally ill, and died begging for forgiveness from Alice and God.⁶⁵ This kind of judgement, verging on a 'vulgar' providentialism strongly condemned by godly writers *is* unusual, though (and I shall return to the events surrounding it): Alice Thornton's providentialism in the main stresses God's mercies rather than his punishments.⁶⁶

'Deliverance' in the specific context of Alice Thornton's narratives of childbirth, then, has strong cultural resonances that are no longer immediately recognisable. Indeed, although this is for

historians a rare and precious first-hand account of the painful and perilous experience of childbirth in the seventeenth century, it ought to be remembered that Alice Thornton's primary purpose was to record God's favours towards her and reveal His power. Again, this is not simply a matter of 'pious fiction'; the reality of her suffering is in no doubt. But her purpose means that she selects her 'afflictions' to place on record; and moreover she details the intensity of her dangers and her pains, the narrowness of her escapes, precisely in order to emphasize the magnitude of her deliverance. Recording God's 'gracious acts of Providence' is the *raison d'être* for her writing, and its essential guiding framework.

And if the providential language of deliverance possessed particular significance in childbirth, equally the connections could work in the other direction, outwards from the delivery chamber to wider society and politics. Like a number of women writers of the period, Alice derived her authority to write from her perceived duty to serve God, a duty that overrode any inhibitions she might have had, as a woman, against writing.⁶⁷ Nineteenth-century autobiographical writings have been described as 'rhetorical projects embedded in concrete material situations', which seems an equally helpful way of understanding this much earlier example.⁶⁸ But it was not a static project; Alice's purpose in writing was subject to dynamic change and development over the course of her life.⁶⁹

Although she did not create her 'books' until the 1660s, she had certainly begun to write much earlier; elements were almost certainly composed during the Civil Wars or Commonwealth, when such writing would have had a particular political significance: she could view it as working on behalf of the 'true' cause of church and state in recording and affirming God's trials and favours towards her. Whether intended for a 'public' audience or not, this writing was *political*. Margaret Ezell points out that to view diaries and letters as 'private' reveals modern assumptions. Spiritual diaries were kept 'not only to enable the author to examine his or her own life, but also to provide examples to other Christians; thus, spiritual autobiographies became one of the most widely published of all literary forms during the period'.⁷⁰ But that was not, perhaps, all: God Himself was the most powerful audience a providentialist could hope for. Like prayer, Alice's writing represented an active, petitionary engagement with that God: the prayers and meditations to be found throughout the book are not minor decorations, but crucial to its structure and purpose.⁷¹

Alice's youth coincided with the disruptions of war, including the encounters with soldiers

who were such a threat to her security; as in other diaries and memoirs during this period, 'personal' and 'political' events are interspersed, and often intertwined.⁷² National politics, and their local impact, decline noticeably in prominence once she becomes a wife and mother during the 1650s, and disappear altogether with the Restoration. The narratives of childbirth and motherhood represent a substantial proportion of Alice's married life, located at the very centre of her first volume. Childbirth was laden with political as well as personal meanings; a public event, with its ceremonies and rituals, as well as a private female 'mystery'.⁷³ If pregnancy and childbirth might empower women praying to God in the birth chamber, it could also permit them to make demands of patriarchal authority, whether their husbands or officers of the law.⁷⁴

For Alice Thornton, her deliverances and deliveries were to play a striking retrospective role in 'personal' and family politics after the death of her husband, which included financial difficulties thanks to his poor management of their affairs, as well as other trials. During her feud with a nephew's wife, which is one of the central themes in the second and third volumes of her memoirs, the battle for Alice's chastity re-emerges in a different form. The woman, noted earlier, on whose misfortunes Alice passed such unusually harsh judgement was the servant of this 'enemy', and the slanders were clearly sexual in nature. And this episode briefly brings into clear view an audience for Alice's writing: circulated in manuscript among her supporters, the first volume of the memoirs became a valuable weapon in the defence of Alice's reputation against these slurs.⁷⁵ Alice's 'sanctified' pains, her trials and deliverances, became proofs of her virtue and piety. And she was not alone in using a spiritual diary as an 'act of self-vindication'.⁷⁶ Hers, then, was a highly embodied godliness rooted in obedience and submission and in acceptance of hierarchical gender relations; it was also a vital source both of subjective identity and of wider authority.

Conclusion

'The challenge of the history of the body to discourse theory is that it confronts discursive creationism with the physical, with a reality that is only in part a matter of words'.⁷⁷ I have explored how one woman, in a particular historical setting, created the words for her physical pain in childbirth; how she made sense of this intense creative/destructive experience. In the process, I found myself continually returning to questions of the relationships between body, mind, language,

power; ‘self’ and ‘word’ and ‘world’, dwelling on Barbara Duden’s suggestion that if ‘we start from the assumption that the imagination and perceptions of a given period have the power to generate reality, we can approach phenomena that are usually rendered invisible because of some a priori axiom of what is natural’.⁷⁸ Alice Thornton’s narratives, I would suggest, illuminate some historical confrontations and interactions between discourse and the physical, between perception and reality, between individuals and their social contexts.

Elaine Scarry demands that we pay close attention to ‘making’: the activities of ‘imagining’, ‘inventing’, ‘creating’, and how ‘we make ourselves (and the originally interior facts of sentience) available to one another through verbal and material artifacts’.⁷⁹ It is the power of the imagination (however taken-for-granted) that makes the language of the prayer in *The Fift Lamp of Virginitie* and the account by Alice Thornton so ‘urgent’ and ‘immediate’; that translated the women and men who were tortured and burnt at the stake in mid-sixteenth-century England into ‘Fuxe’s martyrs’, embodied symbols of heroic suffering; that made possible the creative adaptation of the discourses of martyrdom to an expression of the agony of childbirth. Alice Thornton’s writing speaks across the centuries and, indeed, beyond words: her account remains immediately accessible and compelling, evoking powerful mental images of a body being torn apart in pain. Yet that accessibility, combined with our very different perceptions, has also worked to obscure the extent to which the meaning of her body and her pain has changed.

I have focused on a Christian mode of imagining where physical suffering creates truth – and, as a result, contestation of that ‘truth’. The torture chamber, the execution of a heretic... or a king, the battle-field, the sick-bed, the delivery room: all of these were sites of struggle that in varying ways centred on bodies, bodies in pain, bodies walking the edge between life and death. Indeed, the authority to define these bodies’ meanings (saint or heretic?) was frequently central to the struggle itself. Alice Thornton created her reality, her understanding of the world in which she lived, through active, interpretive dialogue between her culture’s discourses and her personal knowledge of physical pain and creation. We cannot understand the ‘pain and peril’ unless we remember the ‘deliverance’: life and death, pain and creation, fear and joy, were for seventeenth-century mothers inseparable and unpredictable partners.

Notes

¹ Particular thanks go to Mark Jenner and Michael Roberts, who both read and commented perceptively and helpfully on the manuscript at various stages, as well as to those who responded to a shorter version delivered at a conference at the University of Essex.

² *The Autobiography of Mrs Alice Thornton of East Newton, Co. York*, ed. by C. Jackson (Surtees Society, Edinburgh, 1875), p.95. Published as a single volume in the nineteenth century, the memoirs originally consisted of three volumes covering Alice Thornton's life from the age of three years (1629) to the troubles that followed her husband's death in 1668. Additionally, she wrote yet another version, a 'Book of Remembrances' in a much shorter notebook form, which is extensively quoted in E. Graham et al (eds), *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen* (London and New York, 1989), 147-64.

³ E.g., S. Mendelson, 'Stuart Women's Diaries and Occasional Memoirs', in M. Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (London, 1985), 181-210, at p.196; P. Crawford 'The Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-century England' in V. Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-industrial England* (London, 1990), 3-38, at p. 21; L. A. Pollock 'Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early Modern Society', in *ibid.*, 39-67, at pp.46, 55; O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Vol. 1, 1500-1800* (London, 1995), p.182; A. Wilson, 'The Perils of Early Modern Procreation: Childbirth with or without Fear?', *British Journal of Eighteenth Century Studies*, 16 (1993), 1-19, at pp.9-12; D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), pp.17-18, 22.

⁴ Wilson, 'Perils of Procreation', p.2.

⁵ See E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985), on the difficulties of expressing physical pain in language and strategies used to overcome this.

⁶ Wilson, 'Perils of Procreation', p.1; Mendelson, 'Stuart Women's Diaries', p.197; L. A. Pollock, 'Childbearing and Female Bonding in Early Modern England', *Social History*, 22 (1997), 287-306, at pp.290-91.

⁷ R. Schofield, 'Did the Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in "the World We Have Lost"', in L. Bonfield et al, *The World We Have Gained* (Oxford, 1986), 230-60, at pp.259, 260.

⁸ Wilson, 'The Perils of Procreation', p.8.

⁹ H. Roodenburg, 'The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-century Holland', *Journal of Social History*, (1988), 701-16, at p.703.

¹⁰ S. Clark, 'French Historians and Early Modern Popular Culture', *Past and Present*, 100 (1983), 62-99, at pp.73, 88.

¹¹ T. Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses of Motherhood* (Manchester, 1994), p.3.

¹² See especially E. Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies* (New York, 1982).

¹³ Wilson, 'The Perils of Procreation', 14.

¹⁴ Recent studies have begun to explore the birth experiences of the less privileged, particularly through court records. See: U. Rublack, 'Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany', *Past and Present*, 150 (1996), 84-110; L. Gowing, 'Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 156 (1997), 87-115, describes a very different set of meanings for birth from those explored here.

¹⁵ Thornton, *Autobiography*, preface.

¹⁶ Mendelson, 'Stuart Women's Diaries', p.185.

¹⁷ A number of historians have questioned perceptions that English protestantism was the preserve of a godly 'elite' in

opposition to a world of plebeian misrule: e.g., E. Duffy, 'The Godly and the Multitude in Stuart England', *The Seventeenth Century*, 1 (1986), 31-55; P. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: the Church in English Society, 1559-1625* (Oxford, 1982); A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), emphasizes that providentialism was widely shared across social ranks and confessional divides.

¹⁸ Thornton, *Autobiography*, p.50.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.51.

²⁰ R. A. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford, 1998), p.183.

²¹ Thornton, *Autobiography*, p.145.

²² Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family*, pp.218-9.

²³ D. Harley, 'The Theology of Affliction and the Experience of Sickness in the Godly Family, 1650-1714: the Henrys and the Newcomes', in O. P. Grell and A. Cunningham (eds), *Religio Medici: Medicine and Religion in Seventeenth-century England* (Aldershot, 1996), 273-92, at p.286.

²⁴ J. Hensley (ed), *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p.224; Wilson, 'Perils of Procreation', p.6.

²⁵ Hensley (ed), *Works of Anne Bradstreet*, p.222.

²⁶ Harley, 'Theology of Affliction', p.286.

²⁷ D. Harley, 'Spiritual Physic, Providence and English Medicine, 1560-1640', in O. P. Grell and A. Cunningham (eds.), *Medicine and the Reformation* (London, 1993), 101-119, at p.101; on illness and attitudes toward it, see also: Harley, 'Theology of Affliction'; R. Anselment, *The Realms of Apollo: Literature and Healing in Seventeenth-century England* (Cranbury, NJ and London, 1995).

²⁸ See Harley, 'Spiritual physic' and 'Theology of Affliction'. Much of Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book; or the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered* (1671), ed. by E. Hobby (Oxford, 1999), is devoted to detailing ways in which the discomforts of both pregnancy and birth may be alleviated.

²⁹ Gen. 3:1-16.

³⁰ [T. Bentley], *The Fift Lampe of Virginitie: Containing Sundrie Forms of Christian Praiers and Meditations* (London, 1582), p.96.

³¹ Sharp, *Midwives Book*, pp.129-33; Thornton, *Autobiography*, p.96.

³² I Tim. 2:14-15.

³³ L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994), pp.18-19.

³⁴ J. R. Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom in English Literature 1563-1694* (Cambridge, 1993); J. M. Mueller, 'Pain, Persecution and the Construction of Selfhood in Foxe's Acts and Monuments', in C. McEachern and D. Shuger (eds.), *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England* (Cambridge, 1997), 161-87.

³⁵ M. Chudleigh, 'On the Death of my Dear Daughter Eliza Maria Chudleigh', *Poems on Several Occasions, Together with the Song of the Three Children Paraphras'd* (London, 1703), p.95.

³⁶ R. E. Pritchard (ed), *Poems: a Modernized Edition* (Keele, 1996), p.161.

³⁷ J. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) (Menston, 1970), pp.38, 41.

³⁸ Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom*, p.193.

- ³⁹ A. Collins, *Divine Songs and Meditations* (London, 1653), pp.10-11.
- ⁴⁰ British Library, Egerton MS 607, 'Devotional Pieces by Elizabeth, Countess of Bridgewater', fol.31; see also fols.22v-49v, 65v-71r, 109v-111v.
- ⁴¹ *ibid*, fols.25r-25v, 30r.
- ⁴² [Bentley], *Fift Lamp of Virginitie*, p.115.
- ⁴³ C. F. Otten, 'Women's Prayers in Childbirth in Sixteenth-century England', *Women and Language*, 16 (1993), 18-21.
- ⁴⁴ C. B. Atkinson and W. P. Stoneman, '“These Griping Greefes and Pinching Pangs”: Attitudes to Childbirth in Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582)', *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 21 (1990), 193-203, at p.197.
- ⁴⁵ J. Cosin, *A Collection of Private Devotions* (1627), ed. by P. G. Stanwood (Oxford, 1967), pp.287-8.
- ⁴⁶ See J. H. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof* (Chicago and London, 1976).
- ⁴⁷ Thornton, *Autobiography*, p.90. See Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom*; Mueller, 'Pain, Persecution and Selfhood'.
- ⁴⁸ Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom*, pp.55-9; E. V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton, 1987), chap. 2.
- ⁴⁹ J. Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable* (London, 1610), pp.1129-30.
- ⁵⁰ Mueller, 'Pain, Persecution and Selfhood', p.162; Scarry, *Body in Pain*, chap. 1. See also E. Hanson, 'Torture and Truth in Renaissance England', *Representations*, 34 (1991), 53-84; P. Lake and M. Questier, 'Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric Under the Gallows: Puritans, Romanists and the State in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 153 (1996), 64-107. (These latter two articles also serve as a reminder that the discourses of martyrdom were not the exclusive property of protestants.)
- ⁵¹ Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom*, pp.8, 9.
- ⁵² *ibid*, p.15.
- ⁵³ Time is also quite precisely delineated in the account, and a number of seventeenth-century accounts of particularly difficult and painful births, while less striking in their descriptions of the pain itself, pay considerable attention to its duration. See, for example, 'Mrs. Elizabeth Freke her Diary, 1671-1714', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 27 (1911), p.4; *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616-1683*, ed. by A. Macfarlane, *British Records of Social and Economic History*, n.s. 3 (1976), p.415.
- ⁵⁴ Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth*, pp.140-1.
- ⁵⁵ Mueller, 'Pain, Persecution and Selfhood', p.180.
- ⁵⁶ Most recently and extensively, Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*. See also K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1973), chap. 4; B. Worden, 'Providence and Politics in Cromwellian England', *Past and Present*, 109 (1985), 55-99; J. Spurr, '“Virtue, Religion and Government”: the Anglican Uses of Providence' in T. Harris et al (eds.), *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford, 1990), 29-47; Harley, 'Spiritual Physic'; M. Gaskell, *Crimes and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000), chap.6.
- ⁵⁷ Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, p.3.
- ⁵⁸ Mendelson, 'Stuart Women's Diaries', p.186.
- ⁵⁹ J. E. Booty (ed), *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book* (Charlottesville, 1976), pp.314-5.
- ⁶⁰ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, pp.27-8; and see *idem*, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant*

Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England (London, 1989). On nationalistic providential interpretations of the 'deliverance' from the Gunpowder Plot, see also Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, pp.243-50.

⁶¹ L. Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* (Oxford, 1973), p.86.

⁶² Thornton, *Autobiography*, p.1.

⁶³ *ibid*, p.3.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, pp.45-7.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, pp.222-3.

⁶⁶ See Harley, 'Spiritual Physic', p.103, on condemnations of the 'tendency to judge others on the basis of their afflictions'.

⁶⁷ Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, pp.xx-xxii; Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1646-1688* (London, 1988), pp.26-75, on the impetus and justification that piety and religious duty provided for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women writers.

⁶⁸ Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford, 1991), p.7.

⁶⁹ Alice Thornton, it should be remembered, never wrote 'an autobiography' (see n.1 above). Her nineteenth-century editor, consciously or otherwise, succeeded in drawing attention to this, even though he chose to create a single chronological narrative from the three manuscript volumes: he frequently juxtaposed versions of the same events from different volumes, bringing to view revisions and changes of emphasis, an ongoing writing *process*. E.g., Thornton, *Autobiography*, pp.146-7, cf. main text and footnote.

⁷⁰ M. J. Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore & London, 1993), pp.34-35.

⁷¹ On the power of prayer, see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp.133-46.

⁷² E.g., Elizabeth Jekyll and Isabella Twysden: E. Clarke, 'Elizabeth Jekyll's Spiritual Diary: Private Manuscript or Political Document', in P. Beal and M. J. Ezell (eds), *Writings by Early Modern Women* (London, 2000), 218-237; F. W. Bennett (ed), 'The Diary of Isabella Twysden, Wife of Sir Roger Twysden, Baronet, of Royden Hall, East Peckham, 1645-1651', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 51 (1939), 113-36.

⁷³ Wilson, 'Ceremony of Childbirth'; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, chap. 4.

⁷⁴ Rublack, 'Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body'.

⁷⁵ Thornton, *Autobiography*, pp.259-60. For the developing power struggle with Anne Danvers, see pp.167, 221-39, 255-60.

⁷⁶ E.g., Anne Halkett: J. Loftis (ed), *Memoirs of Anne, Lady Halket and Anne, Lady Fanshawe* (Oxford, 1981).

⁷⁷ Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*, p.17.

⁷⁸ B. Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-century Germany* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1991), p.6.

⁷⁹ Scarry, *Body in Pain*, p.22.