
Elizabeth Joscelin, a seventeenth-century woman, discovers that she is pregnant and purchases a winding sheet for her shroud. Macabre as this may seem, this combination of preparations for birth and death sets the context for the production of Joscelin’s only surviving work, a treatise addressed to the child she was expecting. This work is intended to substitute in some way for her presence in the event of her death in childbirth.

The text, which has not been reprinted since 1894, has now been made available to us in a scholarly edition. Joscelin (1595?-1622) was the daughter of Sir Richard Brooke and Joan (Chaderton) Brooke. Her mother died when she was six, and her maternal grandfather, Thomas Chaderton, Bishop of Lincoln, whose heir she was, is thought to have been responsible for her education. Joscelin knew Latin, which was unusual even for educated women in the early seventeenth century, according to the evidence which survives.

In 1616 she married Torrell Joscelin, who had studied at Jesus College, Cambridge and Lincoln's Inn. She had no children for the first six years of her marriage, so she studied history, languages, poetry and divinity, and wrote poetry, none of which now survives. In 1622 she became pregnant. Haunted by the fear of dying in childbirth, she wrote the text which became known as *The Mothers Legacy to Her Vnborn Childe*. In a prefatory letter she advises her husband how to bring the child up, and she gives direct advice to the child on how to live a godly life and qualify for salvation. In doing this, Joscelin was contributing to a literary subgenre of the period, known as the mother’s advice book. However, hers is the only extant example written for an unborn child.

The text found favour in its own time, and also with the Victorians, for its religiosity and pathos, enhanced by the prophetic nature of Joscelin’s fear, as she did die nine days after giving birth to a daughter, Theodora. Her book was discovered by her husband after her death and was given to
Thomas Goad to edit and publish. It even appeared in print in America in
the nineteenth century. More recently, feminist scholars have debated
their understandings of the text, particularly whether Joscelin’s self-
effacing authorship device should be read as an inscription of the
internalisation of patriarchal structures or as a strategy which enables the
production of her text.

An important feature of this edition is Metcalfe’s decision to print a
transcript of Joscelin’s own holograph text, with emendations from the
manuscript copy made by Thomas Goad, opposite a transcript of the
second impression of the first printed edition (1624). This gives the reader
a chance to compare these three textual versions. Goad’s emendations are
particularly interesting because he was not just editing the text but was
also endorsing it with an ‘Approbation’. Thus, we see the changes
imposed by a male cleric on a laywoman’s text. Goad even changed the
spelling of her name as it appears in her signature in the manuscript, an
emendation which Metcalfe has obvious delight in restoring.

The text itself shows Joscelin’s classical education more in her use of
language and skill in marshalling argument than in direct reference. There
is one quotation from Ovid’s *Fasti* and one reference to the *Aeneid*, both
of which are pressed into the service of Christian doctrine. The *Aeneid* is
used as an exemplum of filial devotion. Joscelin’s style at times has a
vividness and intimacy about it, as when, enjoining her child against too
much interest in fashion, she says ‘Mistake me not nor giue your selfe
leaue to take too much liberty w^th^ sayinge [,] my mother was too strict:
noe I am not, for I giue you leaue to follow modest fashions ...’ (72). She
is capable of remarkable detachment in imagining her own death: ‘It may
peradventure when thou comst to som discretyon appear strange to thee to
receyve theas lines from a mother that dyed when thou weart born ...’ (60).
She goes on to compare her action in writing the *Mothers Legacy* out of
spiritual concern with the action of men who take care over the temporal
inheritance they leave their children. In fact Theodora inherited her
estates as well.

Another striking aspect of the *Mothers Legacy* is that Joscelin
imagines herself writing to both a daughter and a son, since she does not
know the sex of her child. This reveals her expectations for children of
both sexes. She sees little difference in the moral programme they must follow for salvation, but is fully conscious of the different roles each must play in the world. She hopes that a son will become a minister of religion, but in the introductory letter to her husband she states her fear that a learned daughter would become proud and thus imperil her soul. Learning for a woman is only acceptable to Joscelin if the woman also absorbs what she describes as ‘true humilitie’ (50).

Joscelin’s work is of obvious importance for seventeenth-century history and literature. This well-set-out edition, which has a full introduction, notes and bibliography, will undoubtedly stimulate further interpretation of the text and introduce the Mothers Legacy to a wider audience.

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