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**“Me thinks if I Were a Man”: An Analysis of Dorothy Leigh’s  
*Mother’s Blessing* as a Response to Joseph Swetnam**

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*As one of the first and most popular female-male authored conduct manuals of the seventeenth century, Dorothy Leigh’s *The Mother’s Blessing* is usually placed in the company of private, domestic literature. However, it does not sit comfortably there. Leigh claims to forget herself, as she rhetorically navigates her way through the constraining but enabling genre of the conduct manual. In this paper, I position Leigh as one of the initial respondents to Joseph Swetnam’s pamphlet *The Arraignment of Lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women*. Swetnam also claimed forget himself, as he stirred up the ire of writers in the early seventeenth century. Critics usually note the responses of Constance Munda and Rachel Speght. Munda and Speght outwardly attacked Swetnam; Leigh is less obvious, but perhaps more effective at dismantling Swetnam’s culturally disruptive pamphlet. Invested with the powerful ethos of a dying mother, Leigh moves beyond the traditional role of a seventeenth-century mother. She transcends boundaries of genre and gender in her gentle and moving—but also somewhat seditious and scathing—*The Mother’s Blessing*. In it, Leigh admits, “[I] forget my selfe,” as she confidently enters the discourse of Early Modern society as if [she] were “a man and a preacher.”*

In 1599, audiences saw Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* at the Globe Theater. In one scene Antony suggests, “But were I Brutus . . . There were an Antony / would ruffle up your spirits” (III.ii.230-32). Antony claims that if he could speak as Brutus spoke, he would move the crowd to action. After hearing Brutus’s stiff and formal rhetoric, the crowd is moved to mutiny by Antony’s passion. Antony, not Brutus, “ruffles” their spirits. In *The Mother’s Blessing*,<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Leigh uses the same strategy Antony used. She admits, “[I] forget my selfe,” and she boldly enters the debates of her day. She

1 Throughout this paper original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization have been preserved as they appear in the second edition of *The Mother’s Blessing* published in 1616. I have, however, silently inserted an apostrophe in the title: *The Mother’s Blessing*, and I have replaced *v* with *u* for readability. I have also used chapter numbers rather than page numbers when referring to *The Mother’s Blessing*.

tries, I argue, to “ruffle up” the spirits of her readers. Indeed, she claims “Me thinks if I were a man and a preacher . . . I should bring many to pray rightly.”<sup>2</sup> This was bold claim for anyone to make during the early seventeenth century, as any instruction on prayer had a political edge.<sup>3</sup> As one of the most popular conduct manuals of the early seventeenth century, Dorothy Leigh’s *Mother’s Blessing* is often categorized as private, domestic literature. However, I argue that it deserves to be analyzed as a social text that responds to and actively engages early seventeenth-century discourse, including Joseph Swetnam’s *Arraignment of Lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women*.

Although her *Mother’s Blessing* is often described by scholars as a maternal “advice book,”<sup>4</sup> it does not fit neatly into that category. Leigh gives motherly advice, but she also assumes various roles throughout her writing that take her into the realms of political and clerical debate. Leigh is mother who has a divine commission, as well as her deceased husband’s last will, as her motivation. She feels obligated to offer her children “spiritual manna.”<sup>5</sup> She draws on the rhetoric of female legacy and the *Artes Moriendi* tradition.<sup>6</sup> Her husband’s will directed her to spiritually train their children. In addition, nature tells Leigh “that [she] cannot long bee here to speake” to her sons, so she leaves a written blessing that will speak long after she is gone. She has the authority of the church as a “fearefull, faithfull and carefull Mother,” a commission from her deceased husband to “see [her sons] well instructed,” and the immediacy of her own death “seeing [her] selfe going out of the world, and [her sons] but

2 Leigh, *Blessing*, Budge, chapter 32.

3 Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, 166.

4 John, “I Have Been Dying to Tell You,” 2; Harde, “Dorothy Leigh,” 106.

5 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 2.

6 Wayne, “Advice for Women,” 57.

comming in” to give her words credit.<sup>7</sup> The title page of the book states: “*The Mother’s Blessing*. OR The godly counsaile of a gentlewoman not long since deceased, left behind for her children.”<sup>8</sup>

Critics comment on the popularity of the *Artes Moirendi* tradition as a platform for sermonizing in early modern conduct books. Kristen Poole notes that *The Mother’s Blessing* is styled as last will and testament, the legacy of a dying mother. This allows Leigh to write freely, and it also confers authority on her words.<sup>9</sup> Her death “affords an idealized, almost sacred dignity to the maternal, literary voice.”<sup>10</sup> Leigh insists she must write. She has a duty to fulfill the terms of her husband’s will. Poole also claims that Leigh’s intended audience was her intimate family,<sup>11</sup> but the title page indicates a broader audience of “all parents.”

A more precise way to consider the text, however, might be to recall that women’s roles had evolved substantially in response to Renaissance humanism and the Protestant reformation. A woman’s role in early modern England included duties such as actively attending sermons and re-teaching the content of the sermons to children, servants, and other family members, including straying husbands.<sup>12</sup> Ample evidence exists that women recorded and responded to sermons in their commonplace books.<sup>13</sup> *The Mother’s Blessing*, rather than being viewed as a traditional deathbed performance, could be considered a lifelong compilation of Christian ideology that Leigh has carefully assembled with the intent of publication after

7 Leigh, *Blessing*, introductory section.

8 Leigh, *Blessing*, title page.

9 Poole, “The Fittest Closet,” 69.

10 Davis, “Redemptive Advice,” 63.

11 Poole, “The Fittest Closet,” 69.

12 Shami and Kneidel, “Women and Sermons,” 158.

13 Burke, “Ann Bowyer’s Commonplace Book,” 1-28; Havens, 52.

her death.<sup>14</sup> As such, Leigh probably intended for her words to join a chorus of voices that responded to the events of her time, especially events that might influence her sons whose parents would not be there to guide them. Historical evidence indicates that Dorothy Leigh had three sons who were of marriageable age when she died.<sup>15</sup> Leigh begins her book by addressing her sons, but she soon quickly transitions to intentionally and specifically address a much broader audience.

“My Children,” she begins, “marvel” not that “in such a time, when there bee so manie godly bookes in the world. . . [that I] for get my selfe in re gard of you.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, she apologizes for forgetting herself and doing something so unusual as to write a book of instruction with the intent of having it published. She claims that

14 Yovonne Day Merrill points out that writers who do not use transitions cannot establish hierarchical reasoning very well. Merrill, *Social Construction*. 183. Leigh provides transitions between her chapters. For example, at the end of a chapter about prayer, she writes, “Therefore, if you would alwise have [prayer], you must alwise use it, and then you will bee humbly, faithfully, & familiarly acquainted with God” (107). She begins the next chapter with “Oh heavenly and happy acquaintance! For the longer thou usest it, the stronger will be thy faith, the humbler thy heart, the earnestest thy zeal, & the holier thy life” (108). Transitions in the early chapters are especially effective because they connect the early, short chapters. Because they are so short, the early chapters risk appearing choppy or haphazard, perhaps like a disorganized commonplace book. However, Leigh’s carefully crafted transitions give her early chapters a strong sense of coherency.

15 Leigh’s biographical information is sketchy. As a young woman, Dorothy Kempe married Ralph Leigh, who is described as a “Cheshire gentleman and soldier under the Earl of Essex at Cadiz” (Davis, *Redemptive Advice*, 291). Although little is known of Dorothy Leigh’s early years, some information regarding her husband Ralph is available. Ralph was the fourth son of Thomas Leigh and his wife Sybil. He had four brothers and five sisters. One of Ralph’s brothers, Uriam, was knighted after a battle in 1597. We also know a little about Ralph Leigh’s death. According to one source, Ralph Leigh was slain in 1597 in Newry, Ireland while in the service of the Earl of Essex (Gray, *Women Writers* 52). Ralph and Dorothy Kempe Leigh had three sons: George, John, and William. Leigh addresses *The Mothers Blessing* to them. In addition, Jennifer Heller notes a possible connection between William Leigh (Dorothy Leigh’s son) and the Winthrop family, who had the rectory at Groton Suffolk before the Winthrops immigrated to New England and joined the Congregational church. William Leigh was possibly beneficed as a parson by the Winthrop family (111). If the biographical information from Gray is accurate, then Leigh’s husband was killed in approximately 1597. This means that at the time of her death Leigh would have been a widow for approximately twenty years, and assuming her sons were fairly young at the time of their father’s death, they would have been raised exclusively by their mother. They would have been young men of marriageable age (or perhaps already married) at the time of Leigh’s death and the publication of *The Mothers Blessing*. There is no record that Leigh remarried.

16 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 2.

“godly bookes” are molding like old garments that have been locked away in chests, while children in the streets need clothing. No one reads these “molding” conduct books. Why is no one reading these books? She does not answer that question. She states simply that they are not being read. Nearly all of the conduct books for women before Leigh’s *Mother’s Blessing* were written by men. Perhaps she is saying, “but were I the author of such a book, then perhaps they would be read.” She justifies deviating from the “usual custome of women” in writing, “a thing that is so unusual” among them. Indeed, she had few precedents. *The Northern Mother’s Blessing* was written anonymously and republished in 1597.<sup>17</sup> A long, rambling poem, it has almost nothing in common with Leigh’s book; it is a book of instructions about how a woman should behave. Another book entitled *The Mother’s Blessing* was published in 1602, but it was written by Nicholas Breton, a man who assumes a mother’s persona.<sup>18</sup> Breton’s text is a debate by men among men about the proper conduct of women. Leigh sets up the audience to expect a “godly” book, a book usually written by men, but in her case, written by a woman. She responds to the culture of her day by doing something similar to what James I had done a few years earlier.

James I wrote *Basilikon Doron His Maiesties Instrvctions to his Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince*, which was published in 1603. It is a conduct book filled with practical advice dedicated “to Henry my dearest sonne, and natural successour.” In 1599, while James was James VI of Scotland, he privately published seven copies of *Basilikon Doron*.<sup>19</sup> The initial seven copies came into the hands of some Scottish Presbyterians who criticized some of the content. In response, James wrote a *proem* or *exordium* for the book and had

17 Hall, *Certaine worthye manuscript poems, of great antiquitie reserued long in the studie of a Northfolke gentleman. And now first published by I.S.* 1 *The statly tragedy of Guistard and Sismond*. 2 *The northren mothers blessing*. 3 *The way to thrifte*, document image 29.

18 Breton, *The mothers blessing*, 1602.

19 Sommerville, Introduction, xix.

it published. Arriving in London in 1603 shortly before James got there, *Basilikon Doron* served as England's introduction to its new king. It was wildly popular,<sup>20</sup> going through at least ten editions between years of 1599 and 1604.<sup>21</sup> The English people were anxious to get a glimpse of their new king.

James tried to reassure his audience that he was Protestant and that he would not seek revenge for the execution of his mother, Mary Queen of Scots. James Doleman maintains that the conduct book was presented back to the king in a variety of ways and that people quoted from it for nearly one hundred years, often using it for their own political ends.<sup>22</sup> Doleman notes that people saw in it what they wanted to see and probably what they hoped was the “trew” mind of their new king. James had initially published only seven copies, and he sought to take the “middle road” in his writing, but this opened him to interpretation and ambiguity. After the initial 1603 edition, it was re published once more in 1616 by James Montagu along with a collection of James's other writing in a commemorative edition.<sup>23</sup> And by 1616, the English people no longer needed an introduction to their king. James often referred to himself as “Solomon,” but by 1616, he had also acquired the title of “The wisest fool in Christendom.”<sup>24</sup>

A “spin-off edition” of *Basilikon Doron* entitled *The Father's Blessing* appeared in 1616. It elaborates on the advice James ostentatiously offers to his son. Catherine Gray convincingly illustrates how *The Mother's Blessing* responds to but at the same time “offer[s]

20 I gratefully acknowledge James Forse for suggesting the addition of publication history for *Basilikon Doron* and supplying reference information.

21 Pollard and Redgrave, *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland...1475-1640*, 321.

22 Doleman, “A King,” 2.

23 Wormald, “James VI and I, *Basilikon Doron*,” 52.

24 The phrase was coined by Sir Anthony Weldon. See Maurice Lee *Great Britain's Solomon* page xi.

mild opposition to” James’s “patriarchal hegemony.”<sup>25</sup> Leigh’s text was accepted as being in a dialogue with *The Father’s Blessing*. In an edition published in the 1620s, the two were found bound together<sup>26</sup> in what might have been considered the ultimate handbook for parents in the early 1600s. However, the texts make a rather odd couple. In *The Mother’s Blessing* Leigh responds to several of James’s arguments, but the authors seem at odds in the discussions about individual scripture reading, restriction of Sabbath-day activities, and the reverence of ministers. Leigh responds specifically to each of those issues in *The Mother’s Blessing*.

More commonly than being associated with James I, however, Leigh’s name is usually coupled with the names of other writers of conduct books. For example, Sylvia Brown links Dorothy Leigh with Elizabeth Jocelin and Elizabeth Richardson. Leigh has very little in common with either author. Their names can be linked only to show the influence Leigh had on later writers. Such comparisons do little to help us understand Leigh’s text. Elizabeth Jocelin’s *Mother’s Legacy* was written while Jocelin was pregnant with her first child. She had what turned out to be a correct premonition that she would die in childbirth. She died of childbed fever nine days after the birth of her daughter. She writes poignantly and privately to her unborn child: ‘It may... appear strange to thee to receyue these lines from a mother that dyed when thou weart born.’ The only audience she imagines is her ‘littell one’ who would need ‘religious trayning’ in the form of moral and spiritual guidance. Her husband found the manuscript and had it published after it had been carefully edited by Thomas Goad, who claimed to have known Joscelin personally.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, *The Mother’s Blessing* is written to a much broader audience and with a much more public purpose. Elizabeth Richardson’s text, published in 1645, is a book of instruction for her daughters and perhaps for a broader audience, but with a very direct

25 Gray, “Feeding on the Seed,” 566.

26 Gray, “Feeding on the Seed,” 565.

27 Brown, “Introduction,” 93.



and limited purpose. It gives instruction on how to pray, offering specific types of prayers outlined for every day of the week and several other occasions. It includes such chapters as “A Prayer to God the Father for Thursday night,” and “A Prayer for Friday at first awaking to God the Son.” Intended as a devotional aid, Richardson’s *A Ladies Legacie to her daughters* has almost nothing in common with *The Mother’s Blessing*. I argue that neither of these texts has anything more than motherly advice in common with Leigh.

Leigh has more in common with a very “vngodly” book. I argue that not only is she responding to James I’s *Basilicon Doron*, but Leigh is also responding to *The Araigment of Lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women*, written by the fencing master/writer Joseph Swetnam in 1615. Although I agree with Kristen Poole and Sylvia Brown that Leigh’s text is a motherly advice book, *The Mother’s Blessing* should also be examined as a response to Swetnam’s text and as a precedent for several later texts, not exclusively mother’s advice manuals. Joseph Swetnam’s, *Araigment* (1616) was a particularly disruptive early modern pamphlet. Deidre Boleyn states that the “Swetnam Controversy” lasted primarily between the years of 1615 and 1620. She describes the pamphlet as “a Jacobean addition to *the querelle des femmes*, a genre rooted in medieval, continental, scholastic soil, which was fed by classical satire on women, most obviously *Satire 6* from Juvenal’s *Satires*, Aristotelian, and patristic ideas about the nature of women”.<sup>28</sup> Boleyn claims that by 1615 the debate had died down considerably until Swetnam published his pamphlet. She also notes that writers who participated in these kinds of “exercises of wit” sometimes attacked and defended the identical position purely for rhetorical showmanship. The uniqueness of Swetnam’s pamphlet, she stresses, lies in its “startling success.”<sup>29</sup>

28 Boleyn, “Because Women Are Not Men,” 39..

29 Boleyn, “Because Women Are Not Men,” 49.

First published under the name of *Tome Tell-Troth, The Araignment of Lewd, idle, forward, and unconstant woment* was quickly identified as being written by Joseph Swetnam, a Bristol fencing master.<sup>30</sup> It is a particularly comprehensive attack on women “combined with an unprecedented level of vituperation.”<sup>31</sup> Swetnam’s book, “sarcastic in its ridicule, was by far the most popular and oft re-reprinted” of the *Querrele des femmes* pamphlets.<sup>32</sup> He portrayed women as nagging, disobedient, garrulous, overdressed, oversexed, drunken, and bawdy. Commentators note that Swetnam’s writing is “pretty feeble stuff,”<sup>33</sup> “verbal diarrhea,”<sup>34</sup> and that his writing created an uproar. They note that it is incoherent in places, often disorganized, lacking in any kind of logical argumentative structure, and they note that he opens himself to attacks.

The *Araignment* invites the audience to see the “Beare-bayting of women.” Swetnam advises women not to read further because they may “bark more at [him] than Cerberus the two-headed dog did at Hercules,” and “if they shoot their spite at [him], they may hit themselves, and so [he] will smile at them, as the foolish Fly which burneth her selfe in the candle.”<sup>35</sup> The book is divided into three chapters and ends with an “exhibition” entitled “the bearebayting, or the vanity of widdowes.”

Dorothy Leigh, who was a widow, would have been familiar with Swetnam’s best-selling text. It survives in thirteen seventeen-

30 Butler, Introduction, vii. In 1617, Swetnam wrote *The School of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defence*, a manual of instruction about fencing. He claims that he was the tutor of James’s son Prince Henry and that although it was not published until after Henry died (He died in 1612), Swetnam maintains that Henry requested the publication (Lucky “A Mouzell” 116).

31 Butler, Introduction, vi.

32 Hull, “Women According to Men, 23.

33 Jones, “Counterattacks on ‘the Bayter of Women,’” 45.

34 Woodbridge, “Dark Ladies: Women, Social History, and English Renaissance Literature” 63.

35 Swetnam, *The Araignment*, “To the Reader.”

century manuscripts, five eighteenth-century manuscripts, and in Dutch translations.<sup>36</sup> Several pamphlets were written in response to Swetnam, including Rachel Speght's *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, published in 1617; Constance Munda's *The Worming of a madde Dogge*, published in 1617; Ester Sowerman's *Ester hath hang'd Haman* in 1617, and the anonymously written play *Swetnam, the Woman Hater; Arraigned by Woman*, performed in 1620. *The Mother's Blessing* was first published 1616. Placing Leigh's name alongside these other writers may seem strange, but the connections should be examined. Speght, Munda, and Sowerman did not write motherly advice literature. Swetnam's and Leigh's texts were both extremely popular, much more popular than Speght, Munda, or Sowerman's texts. None of those texts were reprinted. Leigh's text, which was published the same year that she died, went through at least nineteen editions from 1616 - 1640.<sup>37</sup> This means that Leigh's book was a best seller by any standards. It was certainly the best-selling book written by a woman of her day, but it was a runaway best seller in general. It is strange that it has been ignored and misinterpreted by scholars. I should note here that Swetnam's *Arainment* was probably more "culturally disruptive" than Leigh's *Mother's Blessing*.<sup>38</sup> My point is not, however to discuss which text was more disruptive, but to evaluate how these texts interacted with each other.

Many critics focus their attention on what Leigh claims as her first consideration for writing. She claims her first "cause" for writing is her motherly affection and Christian duty.<sup>39</sup> However, her second "cause," after motherly devotion, is to admonish her reader to *write*, a strange request for a mother who is intent on offering godly counsel. She tells all readers to write legacies for their own children. Joscelyn and Richardson could have taken the advice of this

36 Steggle, "The New Academy and The New Exchange," 67.

37 Gray, "Feeding on the Seed," 563.

38 Davis, "Redemptive Advice," 64.

39 Harde, "Jane Anger," 106; Poole, "The fittest closet," 2.

popular book. They each wrote books. She tells them to “remember to write a booke unto your children, of the right and true way to happinesse.”<sup>40</sup> Leigh emphasizes the power of books to inform the mind and the memory. Books, she claims, will live on after the author is gone, extending across generations and history.<sup>41</sup>

She claims that her third “cause” is to “encourage women” to show how carefully and quickly women put sin out of their own lives and the lives of their posterity. Here she suddenly speaks to “women” instead of her sons, and she actively enters the debate over original sin (chapters 5 and 9). She could be responding here to an earlier defense for women: *Jane Anger Her Protection for Women*. Jane Anger (probably a pseudo name for a gentleman) claims that “woman are more excellent than men.” Men are made of “filthy clay” which God “purified” by transforming it into flesh so when He made woman from man’s flesh, He used a more refined and purified substance, so logically woman is purer than man. This type of rhetoric became very common in the writings of early modern polemical and religious writings.<sup>42</sup> Using similar rhetoric, Leigh claims that since women have renounced their appetites and passions, and subjected their will to their husbands, they are actually spiritually superior to men.<sup>43</sup> Even though Leigh does not mention Swetnam’s text specifically, she could be responding to him here. Rachel Speght’s *A Mouzell for Melastromus* is usually touted as the first “female-authored” text to respond directly to Swetnam.<sup>44</sup> However there is reason to question this claim. Not all texts overtly name the text to which they directly respond. Speght is given prominence for a couple of reasons. First, she directly engages Swetnam. Second, she is female. Despite those reasons, Dorothy Leigh’s writing is a more rational text for comparison to *The Araignment*.

40 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 4.

41 Davis, “Redemptive Advice,” 66.

42 Vecchi, “Jane Anger,” 679.

43 Davis, “Redemptive Advice,” 65.

44 Lewalski, *Writing Women*, 156.

First, critics like to showcase Speght because she directly attacks Swetnam. However, not all rhetors name their rhetorical opponents. For example, Daniel Tuvil's *Asylum Veneris: or, A Sanctuary for Ladies* (1616) may be intended partly as a rebuttal of Swetnam's arguments,<sup>45</sup> but Tuvil never names Swetnam. In addition, some of the pamphlets in the popular pamphlet wars of the early seventeenth century do not directly identify their "opponent" pamphlet. Instead, writers trusted that the reading public would make the connections. For example, James made a similar move in 1616. In his "Speech in the Star Chamber," he criticized Sir Edward Coke without ever mentioning Coke's name: "Another sort of Justices are busie-bodies, and will have all men dance after their pipe, and follow their greatnesse, or else will not be content. . . . These proud spirits must know, that the country is ordained to obey and follow GOD and the King, and not them."<sup>46</sup> James expected everyone to know that he aimed his criticism directly at Coke. In the same way, perhaps not all respondents to Swetnam identified him specifically in their writing. Leigh did not have to name Swetnam to engage his writing. She probably expected audiences to make the connections.

Second, Speght is supposedly the first *female* to respond to Swetnam's pamphlet.<sup>47</sup> Not only is she a female, but she also appears to have received some training in rhetoric, and she publishes a contentious pamphlet, getting down in the ring with Swetnam, so to speak, to argue against Swetnam's claims and to attack Swetnam personally. Swetnam's pamphlet is unique in the number of responses that it generated. Perhaps some respondents chose not to encounter Swetnam in the ring. I argue that Leigh refuses to stoop to Swetnam's contentious and "carnavalesque" level in responding to his pamphlet. She chooses the conduct manual genre, and she never

45 Butler, "Introduction," xxi-xxiii.

46 qtd. in Sommerville, "James I," 222.

47 Munda and Sowerman are probably pseudo names and not female authors. Speght is the only positively identified female respondent to Swetnam out of the three first responders that are usually listed.

mentions his name. In that way, she answers him with a form of silence. Women had to carve out an appropriate space to respond, or they could be branded as scolds.<sup>48</sup> Leigh's silence in this regard increased her credibility.

Speght could have been responding to both Leigh and Swetnam. Speght certainly would have read Leigh. Leigh's text was, after all, an immediate best-seller, and Speght wrote a year after Leigh was published. Both Leigh and Speght respond to the disparaging remarks Swetnam makes about women. Speght, however, directly attacks Swetnam. Speght's pamphlet was published only once. In *The Mother's Blessing*, Leigh strongly encourages women to write. Speght may have gathered courage to respond to Swetnam after reading Leigh's advice. In any case, Leigh's writing provides a more balanced response to Swetnam in many ways. Speght was the eighteen-year-old daughter of a minister. Her attackers claimed she was young and lacked experience about marriage and the role of women. Leigh, on the other hand, was a widowed mother of three children writing at the end of a long and pious life.

Swetnam compares all women since Eve to eagles. However, he reminds readers, "Eagles eat not men till they are dead, but women devour them alive."<sup>49</sup> Clearly, Swetnam is not the only author or the first writer to make such a comment. However, based on the proximity of time in which they both wrote, the popularity of Swetnam's text, and the parallel arguments, Leigh could be responding to him. Swetnam claims:

Women are called night Crows for that in the night they will make request for such toys as cometh in their heads in the day, for women know their time to work their craft. For in the night, they will work a man like wax and draw him as the adamant doth the Iron. . . A man must take all the pains, and women will spend all the gains.<sup>50</sup>

48 Butler, "Introduction," xxi-xxiii.

49 qtd. In Miller, "Hens," 166.

50 Swetnam, *The Araignment*, 12.

Leigh assumes the persona of *all* women, not only mothers as she enters the debate on original sin: “But wee women may now say, that men lye in waite every where to deceive us.” She uses Judas as an example of a man who betrays his master with a kiss. Even so men betray their mistresses “with a kisse & repent it not: but laugh and rejoyce, that they have brought sinne and shame to her that trusted them.” She turns the tables on Swetnam. She claims that even though Eve brought sin into the world, Mary took the “wofull shame” away. Indeed God “working in a woman” brought salvation to women *and to all of their “posterity,”* including man, and “*man* can claime no part in it.”<sup>51</sup>

She also identifies who is really misbehaving at night. She claims that men “in the night” when they should be meditating on the Laws of God are “thinking of some earthy thing or other, either of this bargain or that purchase.”<sup>52</sup> She then modifies the wording of scripture to support her arguments in opposition to James I, who admonishes his readers to leave the interpretation of scriptures to those who are more qualified,<sup>53</sup> Leigh recommends that all parents should teach their children to read before they are four years old, “be they Males or Females,” *so they can read and interpret the Bible for themselves,* having read it “in their owne mother tongue.”<sup>54</sup> She claims that “no woman is so senselesse, as not to looke what a blessing . . . EVE our Grandmother brought us to.” Then she references and interprets John 6:53, which in the King James Version published in 1611 reads “Except ye eat of the *flesh of the Son of Man,* and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” She makes some changes to the text. She claims “except they feed on the *seed of the woman,* they have no life.”<sup>55</sup> Earlier in the chapter, she explains that the “*seed of the wom-*

51 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 9 (emphasis added).

52 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 43.

53 Gray, “Feeding on the Seed,” 570.

54 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapters 8 and 11 (emphasis added).

55 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 9 (emphasis added).

an hath taken down the Serpents head.” Then she substitutes “seed of the woman” for “flesh of the Son of Man.” Swetnam claims that all women are wasting men. Leigh claims that a woman saved all men—or at least made salvation possible for all men.

Women, she writes, should be subject to their husbands, but then she paraphrases “God.” She writes, “As if God in mercy to women should say; [you] shall be subject to your husbands.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, if God were here he would say it this way. . . . But then she gives some very interesting wifely counsel. In direct opposition to Swetnam’s *Arraignement*, she claims it is “almost incredible to be believed” how many chaste matrons have cared less for their lives than they did for their chastity. Swetnam identifies all women as being the deceivers. She identifies women as having to “endured all those torments, that men would devise to inflict upon them.”

Swetnam claims that no woman is free from at least “one idle part.” All women share at least that common that common flaw and have “filthines in her.”<sup>57</sup> Leigh, in contrast, offers specific suggestions of strong, productive, and virtuous women, possibly as a refutation to Swetnam. She notes five wives whose names form an acrostic for Mary: Michal, Abigail, Rachel, Judith, and Anna. She lists one sentence about each woman. Leigh would probably expect a “godly” audience to know the details. She credits “some goodly and reverend men of the Church for having gathered this,” but she does not say who those men were or where the material is “gathered.” Critics attribute the acrostic to Leigh instead of to an outside source.<sup>58</sup>

Leigh’s virtuous women were not always submissive, silent, and obedient. Michal, according to Leigh, “saved David from the fury of Saul, “but Michal was also very headstrong when she felt that David was not being humble enough as he danced before the Lord.

56 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 9.

57 Swetnam, *The Arraignement*, 13.

58 Gray, “Feeding on the Seed,” 570.



In fact, she openly defied David. Abigail, Leigh says, was “wise.” Abigail was also the wife of Nabal, a fool. When her husband “railed on” David’s messengers, she diffused the situation by preparing two hundred loaves and two bottles of wine for David. She told David her husband was a fool, but in a way, she made an intercession for him by her diligence and humility, and she probably saved many lives. After Nabal died, she became David’s wife (I Samuel 25:3). Rachel was “amiable in the sight of her husband” according to Leigh. He worked fourteen years before he could have Rachel for his wife. Judith, according to Leigh, is “stout and magnanimous in the time of trouble.” That is an understatement. Judith, according to the apocrypha, was a beautiful widow who inspired her people to fight back against the Assyrians, not to surrender. She cut off the Assyrian general’s head. Her actions motivate her people to rally against the Assyrians. Finally, Anna is “patient and zealous in prayer.” Anna, a prophetess in the temple when Jesus was presented, was one of the few who recognized Him as the chosen Messiah. These women, Leigh claims, should persuade all women to “imbrace chastity.” They also give some Swetnam some examples to consider.

Leigh offers the most interesting example of virtue, however, in Susannah. Even though Susanna is “not cannoicall,” Leigh claims Susanna is famous throughout the world as a virtuous woman, among heathens and infidels as well as the people of God. A beautiful and chaste wife, Susanna remains virtuous even when two elders spy on her and try to trap her into having sex with them. When she refuses, they tell her they will expose her as an adulteress, but she still refuses. She calls out, and people come running. The elders say they saw her making love to a young man, and based on the elders’ testimony, she is condemned to die. Because of discrepancies in their stories, however, Susanna is freed. Interestingly, this is the story of a woman who was stalked after, lusted after, and falsely accused by those professing to be pious religious leaders. Susanna has to defend herself against them, and she remains virtuous. Leigh

supplies Swetnam with yet another virtuous woman whom he must have overlooked. She adds Susanna to the list of women who did *not* try to seduce and waste men, women who were pursued, harassed, and corrupted by men.

*The Mother's Blessing* in this regard has much more in common with Speght, Munda, and Sowerman than with Jocelin and Richardson, but she appears to be responding even more directly to Swetnam. Leigh not only describes godly wives, but she also illustrates how to choose them and who is ultimately responsible for the success of marriage.<sup>59</sup> This was, of course, the subject of earlier conduct books. In fact, Robert Cleaver (and John Dod) wrote *A Godlie Form of Household Government*, published in 1598. They focus, like Swetnam, on the physical and material consequences of obtaining a good wife, not on the spiritual consequences.<sup>60</sup> Swetnam thinks wives try to “devour” their husbands before they are dead and that they try to spend all that the husband makes. Similarly, Cleaver and Dod warn that a husband who is not beloved by his wife “holdeth his goods in danger, his house in suspicion, his credit in balance, and also his life in peril.” Although it was published a few years later, George Herbert’s requirements for a wife are not work noting. He claimed that a man should certainly have a godly wife, and if she were not godly, he should be doing all he could to make sure she becomes godly. He then lists the three criteria for a wife. First, she must train her children and servants in the ways of God. Second, she must know how to cure wounds. Third, she must be able to provide for the family so they will not lack “sustenance,” nor that “her husband be brought in debt.” He stresses that these qualities are not “outward qualities.”<sup>61</sup> In addition, the clergy preached about how men are more careful about all other “purchases” or investments than they are about choosing a wife. They compared wives to an

59 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 12.

60 Cleaver, *A godly forme of houshold government*. 1621.

61 Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 168.

“artificial and equivocal limb” or “a wart” and even to “a cancer, that consumeth the flesh, wasteth the vital parts, and eateth to the very heart.”<sup>62</sup>

Leigh seems to be responding directly to such sermons and pamphlets, of which Swetnam’s was one of the most popular. She places the responsibility for choosing a godly wife and for ensuring a successful marriage squarely on the shoulders of the husband. She offers guidelines for choosing a wife. She has two basic rules: seek a godly wife, and love her. She uses some of her strongest language in exhorting her sons to marry for love and never to change in those feelings. “Let nothing” she writes “after you have made your choice, remove your love from her.”<sup>63</sup> She claims that a man is “very foolish” to dislike his own choice, especially since God “hath given a man much choyse among the godly.” She claims never to have seen such “senseles simplicity” as to “mislike” one’s own choice, especially when a man has “almost a world of women to choose him a wife.”<sup>64</sup>

She presents four more guidelines to follow in choosing and living with the choice of a wife. So her guidelines appear like this. First, marry someone godly. Second, marry someone you love. Third, not to be so stupid as not to like your own choice. Fourth, if you chose unwisely, use discretion to cover up your own stupidity. Fifth, if you have no discretion, you should have “policy.” Policy meant using prudent conduct or expedient behavior, even if you have made an unwise choice. Finally, if you lack all of these, you are unfit for any woman. She boldly declares, “If you get wives that be holy and you love them, you shall not need to forsake me,” but she warns “If you have wives that you love not, I am sure I will forsake you.” She continues, “If shee be thy wife, she is always too good to be thy seruant, and worthy to bee thy fellow.”<sup>65</sup>

62 Miller, “Hens,” 165.

63 Leigh, *Blessing*, Chapter 12.

64 Leigh, *Blessing*, Chapter 13.

65 Leigh, *Blessing*, Chapter 13.

Towards the end of her text, Leigh enters yet another popular debate. She begins her final chapters by warning against idleness, and she spends the entire last chapter preaching a sermon about preachers who are idle. Earlier texts also warned against idleness. Swetnam claims it is the fault all women share.<sup>66</sup> Leigh agrees with Swetnam that idleness is to be condemned. Clearly, Swetnam is not the only one condemning idleness. Protestants uniformly condemn idleness. George Herbert refers to idleness as “the great and national sin of this land.”<sup>67</sup> But Leigh adds a very interesting twist. She claims that a certain amount of time and solitude is essential for people to please God. Remember the books “molding” in people’s chests? She claims that even preachers are too busy with things of the world to tend the flocks as they should. This supports her claim of the power of the written word. Leigh indicates that reading, writing, and meditating/interpreting are essential, and that a certain amount of leisure is necessary for that.

It seems to be quite a modern idea. She includes prayer as a form of meditation. The most dangerous “let” of prayer is “a thing that carrieth some colour of goodness.” She notes that the Saints are “troubled with their marchandize . . . buying & selling . . . coueting to grow rich . . . [using] . . . riches vnlawfully”. Their heads are “so busied about earthlie thinges that be lawfull, that [they] forget to meditate of the Law of God.” Leigh believes that “the world is with us too much, late and soon.”<sup>68</sup> She identifies such behavior as a “dangerous disease, of which many die.”<sup>69</sup> She points directly at the man who is too busy to remember the Law of God.

She writes, “Labour for learning . . . that is a thing which I cannot buy for you; you must get it by your own industrie and diligent studie.” Ronald Cooley claims that Herbert’s *Country Parson* is

66 Swetnam, *The Araignment*, A3

67 Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 56.

68 Adapted from Wordsworth, “The World is too much with us; late and soon.”

69 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 37.

reminiscent of Francis Bacon, with its parallel, pithy phrases.<sup>70</sup> The following phrase from Dorothy Leigh could be compared to Bacon as well. Regarding learning, she says, “It will be a wise master to teach you, a diligent seruant to attend you, a discreet Counsellour to admonish you.”<sup>71</sup>

Leigh then composes her own parable about the devil’s “poysonous baits.” The devil tailors his baits to attract and catch certain fish. He uses great bait for a great fish. He alters baits and lines according to his prey, and then he “poysoneth” the bait. “Satan” she says, “will sawce it with sweet poison, that hee will deceiuv the wisest worlding in the world.” Then she changes the image: “for Satan hath spred his net, as the spider doth her webbe. Now the spider lieth close hidden in a darke hole, untill the sillie flie bee entangled, and then hee comes and taketh her as his owne: euen so Sathan lieth close, vntill hee see you entangled within the things of this world, and then he claimeth . . . you . . . for his own.”<sup>72</sup> Helen Razovsky justly accuses Leigh of not only interpreting scriptures, but also of writing her own gospel.<sup>73</sup>

She spends the last chapters addressing the problem of preachers who are idle, those who neglect their duties. She proposes a democratic response. “Moue the people,” she admonishes, “to provide themselvues a Preacher . . . speake to the Magistrates, mourne to see the Alehouses full, and the Church of God emptie.”<sup>74</sup> Although she does not call for a mutiny, she does present here a form of dissent. Authorities fined people for not attending church. Puritans, however, often participated in a controversial and illegal practice of “gadding.” Leigh exhorts the people to go gadding, which meant moving from

70 Cooley, “*Full of all Knowledg*,” 2004.

71 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 37.

72 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 39.

73 Razovsky, “Remaking the Bible,” 19.

74 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 42.

one congregation to another in search of an effective preacher. They would try to avoid fines by attending their own congregation, but then they would visit other congregations as well in search of a more effective preacher, someone who could feed their spiritual hunger, so to speak.<sup>75</sup> This type of behavior challenges James's *Basilicon Doron*, which insists that the public reverence ministers.<sup>76</sup> Leigh says, "remoue you, where you may haue and heare the Word."<sup>77</sup> She accuses preachers of being too busy seeking their own and neglecting their duty to the Church. She quotes Isaiah 56:10 that refers to negligent preachers as "dumb dogs that will not barke."

Her final chapter is reserved for instruction of preachers. She accuses the preachers of "darkening" the "Gospell" with "thicke clods of this earthen world." Then she corrects herself: "Did I say darken their light? Nay they . . . driue many from Christ by loue of their owne . . . & by idlenes & negligence in preaching." She has already identified men who were too busy for the things of God, but here she points directly at idle preachers, accusing them of the sin Swetnam assigned to all women. She closes her *Mother's Blessing* with a rousing call to pray for "the Preachers" to be firm and steadfast.

In most "dying parent" legacies, and in the most popular funeral sermons of women who died exemplary deaths, the final scenes usually retell the epic battle of the dying person (woman) with Satan.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, Leigh's final words seem oddly out of place for a dying-mother legacy. Indeed, she turns the entire deathbed battle-scene

75 Gray, *Women Writers*, 50.

76 Gray, "Feeding on the Seed," 574.

77 Leigh, *Blessing*, chapter 43.

78 Phillippy, *Women, Death and Literature*. For example, in the conduct manual *The Crystalle Glass*, Philip Stubbs relates his young wife's final moments as she conquers the enemy, surrounded by her family and the preacher. They witness her valiant battle to the end. Her last words indicate her disregard for the world and her desire to be with God. She gives her child to her husband's care and rejects the world in order to join God (Phillippy, 104). Katherine Brettergh is another example of a woman whose death promoted her life story as one of vigorous anti-Catholic activism. She provides "yet another example of an early modern woman whose faith, which was more deeply rooted and felt than that of her husband's, gave her the strength to take on the dominant religious role in the family" (Phillippy, 105).

upside down. Instead of being surrounded by ministers who are praying for her as she fights her last great battle with Satan, Leigh appears genuinely concerned with what is going on in the world she claims to be leaving. She is not fighting any kind of climactic battle with Satan. Indeed, she describes a constant battle, one she has fought throughout her life. Now, at the close of her *Blessing*, instead of having preachers pray for her, Leigh is praying for the preachers. Not only that, she is telling everyone else to pray for them “and all such as are in high places.”

This highly unusual occurrence concludes her *Blessing* with a rousing call to action, a plea for everyone to pray for spiritual leaders whom she has claimed may be leading people astray. This is not the usually emotional scene of a dying mother. Leigh knew her *Mother's Blessing* would not be published until after she died. *The Mother's Blessing* is very much about living. There is no ultimate last epic battle with Satan. Indeed, her last sentence sounds like much more like a sermon, in this case a sermon to “all,” including preachers.

All in all, she says exactly what she would say if she were “a man and a preacher.” She “forgets her selfe,” and hopes that for a moment her readers will hear a man, a preacher, an obedient wife, a dying mother, a voice of authority. In response to Swetnam, she seems to exclaim, “O judgment, thou art fled to brutish beasts, / And men have lost their reason (*Julius Caesar* III.ii.109). Like Antony, she invites a comparison of words, in her case words published by other early modern authors. She preaches to, and perhaps moves, her readers by her words. Certainly, she did not single out one text and respond to it. *The Mother's Blessing* echoes the debates raging across her early modern English society. She took up her quill and responded to those debates in one of the only forums available to a woman. I think she expected her *Blessing* to “ruffle up” their spirits.

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