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The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke. Edited by
Raymond A. Anselment. Camden Fifth Series.

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The Beleaguered Widow of West Bilney

Aki Chandra Li Beam

The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke. Edited by Raymond A. Anselment. Camden Fifth Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xi + 350 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-521-80808-1.

Recalling her antipathy toward a proposed daughter-in law, the English gentlewoman Elizabeth Freke (1641–1714) wrote: “I cared nott to be a servantt to any one in my old age” (230). Freke’s two “remembrances,” composed when she was in her sixties and seventies, testify to her struggles to achieve independence and security in an often harsh and unforgiving environment, managing indeed an old age in which, though lonely, she was not “beholden” to anyone. Spanning the last forty-three years of Freke’s life, beginning with her 1671 marriage on “a most dreadfull raynie day (a presager of all my sorrows and misfortunes to mee)” (211), these two reminiscences (increasingly resembling diary entries as they approach the present) take us through her early troubles in marriage and motherhood, on to the misfortunes she encountered in middle life as she tried to build a life for herself in West Bilney, Norwich, saddled with an absent and uninterested husband and an undutiful son.

In her narratives, Elizabeth emphasized her vulnerability as a woman alone facing unruly tenants, legal problems, smallpox outbreaks, accidents of nature, an untrustworthy estate manager, the deaths of close family members (father, beloved grandson, and husband), the infirmities of old age, and even excommunication by the local bishop. Time and again throughout her life she was cheated of her money and belongings, and she was forced to move seven times to bare walls and a naked house, due to her husband’s frequent commandeering of family resources for his Irish estate building. As a result, material goods became for Elizabeth a metaphor for security, and her ultimate success in amassing wealth in the face of misfortune and maltreatment, securing a valuable estate, purchasing a baronetcy for her son, and leaving a substantial inheritance to her grandsons, allows Elizabeth to emerge as a woman of tenacity and perseverance. As she wrote in 1712: “Thus have I lived neer seven years in my widowhood in a continuall trouble and to see the fall of most of my enimies without the assistance, help or comfourt of any friend” (304).

The manuscripts of Elizabeth Freke’s reminiscences are contained in two commonplace books held by the British Library. The larger “white vellum” volume, which includes the earlier reminiscence, also contains letters, recipes, snatches of poetry and history, a survey of the West Bilney estate, and some inventories. The second “brown wallpaper” volume, begun some ten years after the first, also contains copies of rental agreements, land deeds, and financial transactions. These two manuscripts were donated to the British Library in 1941 by Lady Mary Carbury, a descendant by marriage of Elizabeth Freke. Early in the twentieth century,

Carbury published the only previous edition of the remembrances, as *Mrs. Elizabeth Freke, Her Diary* (Guy & Company, Ltd.: Cork, 1913). This edition “cut, conflated, and rearranged the two versions of the life” (2), amalgamating them into a chronologically arranged single document that misrepresented the text and concealed the dialogue between the two originally separate narratives, written at different times.

In *The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke*, Raymond Anselment corrects this mistake. Part of the long-running and highly respected Camden series of primary sources in medieval and early modern British history, Anselment’s multiple-text edition is divided into three sequential parts. Much of the white vellum manuscript volume makes up Part I: “Remembrances, 1671–1714,” comprising 173 pages, mainly dated diary entries, but also including an inventory of the contents of Freke’s house (helpfully glossed by Anselment in the footnotes), transcriptions of letters received, passages from her readings, some legal arguments, and an account of the Irish wars. The brown manuscript volume is presented in Part II: “Remembrances, 1671–1713,” comprising seventy-seven pages of dated entries, while Part III: “Miscellaneous Documents,” contains forty-one pages of some of the additional material in both manuscripts that Anselment feels pertain to the remembrances. These include a ledger of expenses incurred during her husband’s death, an estate history and inventory, a list of money Freke lent to her husband, a list of documents left for her executors, and a recipe for laudanum.

Anselment’s thirty-six-page introduction deals with biographical material, treats thematic concerns, and notes his editorial practices. These are in accordance with the Camden series principles and recommendations, and include editing poems to reflect pentameter lines, isolating and indenting date entries, modernizing capitalization, expanding abbreviations, standardizing punctuation, and preserving the original spellings. The editorial emendations are unobtrusive and succeed in clarifying Elizabeth Freke’s strong, individual voice. The text is fully annotated, with footnotes largely devoted to identifying people, correcting dates, defining archaic terminology, and providing additional information gleaned from related documents such as marriage and baptismal registers. The index is adequate, although most of the headwords are proper names of people and places; a greater array of thematic topics would have been welcome.

By making available the two versions of the remembrances in their entirety, Anselment hopes to “clarify the refashioning inherent in each stage of writing and rewriting,” arguing that “together the two manuscript versions reveal a sense of self unique among early modern women’s autobiographies” (1, 3). Despite Freke’s paranoia and intolerance, and the intemperate harshness of much of her writing, in his introduction Anselment manages to portray Elizabeth Freke sympathetically, as complicated and resourceful: a “contentious, melodramatic, yet formidable figure” (3). Sensitively writing of her frustrations, grief, and pains, he dissects her self-presentation and her revisions of her remembrances to demonstrate that, taken together, the two manuscripts reveal an attempt to “recreate meaning in her troubled life” (2).

As Elizabeth Freke, in her brown manuscript volume, retold and revised the entries in her white vellum book, adding and deleting passages, she provided new representations of herself as a wife, mother, and widow. For example, in the second manuscript, written after her

husband's death, he is referred to sentimentally as her "deer husband" (250), rather than as the neglectful and emotionally abusive spouse of the earlier manuscript. Later, in her widowhood, she criticized her son for his lack of emotional support, replacing his warmer treatment in the first version. Because Anselment is intent on exploiting the alterations between the texts, at times the reader is tempted to wish that the dated entries were interleaved for ease of comparison. In choosing to present each text sequentially in its entirety, however, Anselment rightly maintains the integrity of both manuscripts. Nevertheless, putting more obvious markers throughout the volume (such as printing the year in the running head) would have facilitated cross-referencing.

Although this volume is a highly useful and important edition of unduly neglected manuscripts, a few further considerations should be kept in mind when using it. Anselment treats Freke's narratives exclusively as remembrances, ignoring the fact that many of the entries were written as a diary, giving us access to a more-impromptu, less-constructed voice. He notes in his introduction that differences in handwriting style and color of ink indicate that certain entries were made at a later date, but there is no way to discern this in the edited text. Other circumstances, such as the fact that the second half of the white vellum notebook is numbered backwards, are mentioned in the introduction, but how this affects the manuscript is not completely clear, leaving the reader wondering about the multiple ways that Elizabeth Freke used her commonplace book.

Omissions and inclusions of supporting material can always be debated. Although Anselment's introduction emphasizes Elizabeth Freke's interest in medical ailments and cures, space constraints caused him to leave out all but one of the 250 recipes and 446 prescriptions that Freke included in the white vellum manuscript. With the current historical interest in women's self-diagnosis and their active relationship with medical professionals, it would have been helpful to include a selection of these preventatives and cures. Other omissions, such as lengthy and repetitive financial accounts, are more understandable. The only respect in which this edition does not entirely surpass the Carbury text is that the older edition included useful illustrations, such as portraits of the family, pictures of the properties, and an engraving of Elizabeth Freke's monument in Westminster. The inclusion of some images of manuscript pages could have been interesting as well.

With this new edition, Elizabeth Freke's experiences and self-fashioning become available to scholars in a less-altered and more-complete form than either the hard-to-find Carbury edition or the uncontextualized excerpts in anthologies of early modern women's writing. This publication of Elizabeth Freke's remembrances will quickly become the standard edition of her writings, and the current interest in early modern women writers will guarantee a receptive readership. Although there are some nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century editions of early modern English women's diaries and memoirs, most still exist only in manuscript, and very few have received the attention of modern scholarly editors. This has been a grievous omission, and Elizabeth Freke's remembrances particularly, for those who have read the manuscript or the Carbury edition, have shouted out for more attention. Freke's memoirs are some of the only extant sustained pieces of personal writing by an older woman in early modern England, and they reveal much about that underexplored period in a woman's life. Unlike many of her female contemporaries, Elizabeth Freke wrote not of her spiritual growth, nor to

enlighten her posterity, but of her secular and materialistic life, and for herself alone. Thus, Freke's voice is almost unique among female personal writing of the time, and assuredly deserves to be heard. With this new edition of her remembrances, Elizabeth Freke can finally take her place among the canon of early modern English female diarists.

The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke, 1671–1714

