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LADY ELIZABETH DELAVAL (1648/9-1717): TOOTHWORMS AND INTERTEXTUALITY

The life-writing manuscript of Lady Elizabeth Delaval exists in a single, bound volume, into which she transcribed various notes originally composed between 1663 and 1672.¹ As Margaret J. M. Ezell has explained, ‘this manuscript volume, both in its presentation and in its content, demonstrates the extent and sophistication of a young woman’s concept of literary self-presentation during the Commonwealth and Restoration’.² This makes the text particularly interesting to literary historians: it contains a mixture of genres including autobiography, poetry, religious mediations, and prayers.

Writing in a commonplace book is normally an occasion for self-reflection on real-life events, and this book is no different. Ezell identifies the voice of the manuscript as that of a ‘passionate soul’.³ However, work on this manuscript by Ezell and, more recently, Femke Molekamp and Julie A. Eckerle has shown that this compendium also displays clear evidence of the wide ranging multi-genre reading that Delaval had done.⁴ The memoirs also, as Molekamp has rightly pointed out, ‘reveal a fragmented selfhood’, one for whom the conflicting pressures of religious piety on the one hand and secular temptations in the life of a privileged young woman, on the other, are evident.⁵ As well as giving an opportunity for self-reflection, one meditation in particular demonstrates the ways that Delaval drew on other texts, religious and medical, to frame her reflective meditation. More intriguingly, research

¹ Lady Elizabeth Delaval, ‘Meditations and Prayers’, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Rawl. D. 78. The manuscript first appeared in a modern and thoroughly researched edition by Douglas G. Greene (ed) The Meditations of Lady Elizabeth Delaval (Gateshead, 1978). See also Flesh and Spirit: An Anthology of Seventeenth-century Women’s Writing, ed by Rachel Adcock, Sara Read, and Anna Ziomek (Manchester, 2014), 197-217 for annotated extracts of this text, including the meditation that is that is the subject of this article. While the meditations were originally written before her marriage, when she as Lady Elizabeth Livingstone, for consistency because this is the name under which the manuscript was known when it was acquired by Richard Rawlinson soon after her deaths and under which it was subsequently catalogued at the Bodleian Library, she is referred to by her married name throughout this article. Following the explanation offered Julie A. Eckerle by life-writing is used here to refer to a broad variety of literary forms from which evidence of a person’s life can be gleaned. See Eckerle, Romancing the Self in Early Modern Englishwomen’s Life Writing (Farnham, 2013), 2.

² Margaret J. M. Ezell, ‘Elizabeth Delaval’s Spiritual Heroine: Thoughts on Redefining Manuscript Texts by Early Modern Women’, English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700, 3 (Oxford and New York, 1989), 216–37 (218).

³ Ezell, ‘Elizabeth Delaval’s Spiritual Heroine’, p. 226.

⁴ Margaret J. M. Ezell, ‘Elizabeth Delaval’s Spiritual Heroine: Thoughts on Redefining Manuscript Texts by Early Modern Women’, English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700, 3 (Oxford and New York, 1989), 216–37; Femke Molekamp, Women and the Bible in Early Modern England: Religious Reading and Writing (Oxford, 2013); Julie A. Eckerle, Romancing the Self cited above.

⁵ Molekamp, Women and the Bible in Early Modern England, 215.

into this anecdote reveals that it is surprisingly similar to another event which happened to a different aristocratic young woman several decades prior to Delaval's anecdote.

The meditation in question centres on an episode of toothache Delaval claimed to have experienced, and it relates her attempts to source a cure, before reflecting on the religious lessons to be drawn from the experience. The topic of toothache is ideally placed for religious reflection since as the proverb goes, 'within the white tooth, doth the importune woorme fret', which is to say that a tooth which appears white on the outside might in fact be diseased and rotten within, as might be the case with a person whose external beauty was masking 'gret deformities to the soule'.⁶ Toothache was very apt as a metaphor too because of the way that tooth decay was conceptualised at this time. Many believed that tooth decay and cavities were either caused by gnawing worms, as per the proverb just discussed, or that the cavity provided a place in which worms could flourish. Worms have been given as an explanation for toothache since ancient times, being described in Pliny's first century *Natural History*, for example.⁷ The wiggling of the worm would aggravate the nerves of the teeth and cause the pain. As *The Idea of Practical Physick* explained, the diseased tooth, 'For the most part it conteyneth within it a worm; by the motion whereof the pain is exacerbated'.⁸ An alternative explanation for toothache was that it was 'caused sometymes of hote or cold distempure' and also 'many tymes though flowing humours out of the head unto the rootes of the teeth, which with ther sharpnes either doe gnaw about them'.⁹ Significantly the term used to describe the action of the humours is 'gnawing' which verb was used to describe the action of a worm in other accounts. The first dedicated dentistry treatise, published in France in 1728, also used this phrasing, railing against quack healers who said that they cure toothache by 'particular essences; others by plasters; others by prayers and the sign of the cross, promising to perform miracles; others have specifics for the worms that they imagine are gnawing the tooth and causes the pain'.¹⁰

⁶ John Florio, *Florio his Firste Fruites which Yeelde Familiar Speech, Merie Proverbes, Wittie Sentences, and Golden Sayings* (London, 1578), 85.

⁷ Walter Hoffmann-Axthelm, *History of Dentistry* (Chicago, 1981), 73. Hoffmann-Axthelm suggests that while Pliny was circumspect about the existence of worms, from the fifteenth century his mention of them was rehearsed as fact (73). The idea of the toothworm was not disproved until 1757 but was so embedded as a theory that it appeared until the twentieth century (ibid. 401).

⁸ Joannes Jonstonus, *The Idea of Practical Physick in Twelve Books*, trans. Nicholas Culpeper and W. R. (London, 1657), 67.

⁹ Philip Barrough, *Method of Phisicke* (London, 1583), 54.

¹⁰ Pierre Fauchard, *Le Chirurgien-dentiste, ou la Traite des Dents*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1728), I, p. 123, cited in translation in Colin Jones, 'Pulling Teeth in Eighteenth Century Paris', *Past and Present* (2000) 166 (1): 100-145 (119). Jones notes that this text coined the term 'dentiste' which followed into English from the 1750s.

Similarly, the bodily torment toothache often brought also made it ideal as a spiritual analogy for a tormented soul. For instance, the pain of the decayed tooth made a useful metaphor for William Gearing to compare to a troubled conscience when he wrote that ‘if the pain of one worm-eaten tooth doth so fearfully vex thee day and night, that it almost driveth thee to madness, think then that thou deservest to be tormented for ever with that fearful Worm of Conscience?’¹¹ Similarly, theologian Jeremias Drexel claimed to be speaking for God when he used the same example of a diseased tooth, this time as an example of the torment of hell, writing:

Fix thy minde, O man! and thinke advisedly, that if so small a disease put thee to such pain, what will the torments of the damned do for all eternity? if one poore worm-eaten tooth afflict thee day and night even to madnesse, how will the worm of conscience tyrannize over those desperate bond-slaves? If the stone, the chollick, or gout, torture a man so grievously upon a soft bed, how will eternall fire torment him with the flame which shall never be extinguished?¹²

It is unsurprising then that when Delaval wrote about a bout of toothache, which she said had kept her awake and had ‘so many days and nights biterly tormented me’, as the theological texts describe it would, she accepted that this was caused by worms.¹³ Delaval described the pain in her teeth as unendurable and a trial from God, a trial which she resolved to suffer meekly: ‘may be God will punish longer making me smart under his Rod, even till I humbly kiss it, by suffering willingly’.¹⁴ Delaval recounted how:

My Head, my Eye, my Teeth, and my Neck are most miserably tormented with rageing pain: all which a poor unlearn’d woman (with Gods blessing) promises to ease me of: she tells me that what I suffer is caused by the Gnawing of lettle worms, that run along with the Bloud in my Veins. I know, tell this now to any Learned Doctor of Physic, and he will rather Smile at my simplicity: for expecting it to be Eased by this womans skill, then not believe her more likely than to cheat than cure me.¹⁵

¹¹ William Gearing, *God's Sovereignty Displayed from Job 9. 12* (London, 1667), 75.

¹² Jeremias Drexel, *The School of Patience. Written in Latin by H. Drexelius. And Faithfully translated into English, by R.S. Gent* (London, 1640), 271-2.

¹³ Delaval, ‘Prayers and Meditations’, 109.

¹⁴ Delaval, ‘Prayers and Meditations’, 108.

¹⁵ Delaval, ‘Prayers and Meditations’, 108-09.

As the daughter of Sir James Livingston, earl of Newburgh, it is reasonable to assume that Delaval would have had ready access to a doctor, but she takes care to point out that the specific pain she was in would not have responded to any of their cures. Many people sought help from local women healers but in this anecdote Delaval accepts treatment from an itinerant woman.¹⁶ In contemporary literature such women could be portrayed as witch-like or figures of fun; a passing comment by Francis Godwin makes the connection clear in one of his stories when he referred to ‘A certaine Witch or wise woman (as wee call them)’.¹⁷ This stereotypical older woman healer as a witch, invoking Satan’s help, or at best a charlatan, who relied on unconventional cures meant that consulting such a woman was frowned upon in certain quarters and this gave the impetus for Delaval’s spirited defence of her depiction of the decision to accept treatment from such a woman.

In doing this, Delaval pitches herself as bravely going against the advice of those around her and ultimately being vindicated as the unconventional treatment worked:

Most strangely has this woman surprised me, and many more here present. For behold here is no less than 200 Worm’s in this Basin which she has taken out of my Gum’s where (though I was willing to try her skill) I did not believe there had been any. But though I wonder much to see a plane Demonstration of what very few will believe, yet at the same time I consider we are far from Understanding all the secrets of nature; nor can I give credit to any man’s judgement before my own eyes. Nor because this womans Art in taking these litle creatures of my gums (where they have so many days and nights biterly tormented me) is unusuall, must I therefore conclude it impossible to be done but either by witchcraft or cozenage.¹⁸

This scenario was typical of the way this procedure was described in other contemporary literature. Often travelling healers would offer this service along with their other pseudo-medical treatments. Dentistry as a discrete skill did not exist at this time and so the treatment of teeth was unregulated.¹⁹ Women might offer dental treatment as part of a range of health

¹⁶ Nineteenth century commentator, John Cordy Jeaffreson, wrote that ‘our ancestors’ had as much trust in the abilities of these wise women as the present generation did in members of the College of Physicians. A Book about Doctors, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1870), II, 43.

¹⁷ Francis Godwin, The Succession of the Bishops of England (London: Andrew Hebb, 1625), p. 381.

¹⁸ Delaval, ‘Meditations and Prayers’, 109-110.

¹⁹ Laura Kennedy notes that while ‘Dentistry’ is not recorded in the *OED* until the nineteenth century, the court of Charles II (where Delaval spent a number of years) is recorded in Edward Chamberlayne’s, Angliae Notitia (London, 1669), 278) as having an ‘Operator of the Teeth’ in its employ. Kennedy, “‘Carry Not A Picke-Tooth

care, but evidence of them working as tooth-pullers, for example, in the way that barber-surgeons or mountebanks did exist but is far rarer. However there is a suggestion in the way this event is described of its bearing resemblance to the public performances of some of these itinerant healers, particularly in displaying the worms to onlookers, for example.

Delaval was aware that people could accuse her of having consulted a witch or at the very least a fraud and defended the woman against that charge, writing, 'Most convincing arguments there are to me this woman deserves not the hated name of a witch; which many people give her, amongst the Giddy multitude, whilst the mere sober sort reckon her to be a cheat'.²⁰ Reginald Scot's famous book, The Discovery of Witchcraft, which went through many editions between 1584 and 1665, explained that many old women accused of being witches were not using the supernatural but rather were committing old-fashioned fraud.²¹

The way that the fraud in this case was thought to be worked was described by John Gerard in his entry for the medicinal herb henbane:

The seed is used by mountebank Tooth-drawers which run about the country, for to cause worms come forth of men's teeth, by burning it in a chafing-dish [portable grate] with coals, the party holding his mouth over the fume thereof, but some crafty companions to gain money convey small lute string into the water, persuading the patient that those small creeping beasts come of his mouth or other parts which he intended to ease.²²

This description probably conflates two methods of this trick, since the burning henbane seeds produces white threads which resemble worms, which would be seen in a dish when the patient rinsed their mouths following treatment, which would leave no necessity for lute-strings.²³ Henbane was used for sedative effects and so using a fume made from it might relieve pain and so add to the apparent efficacy of the treatment. Delaval was alert to these methods, perhaps from reading the herbals or similar accounts and was quick to refute the possibility of this having happened in her case:

In Your Mouth': An Exploration of Oral Health in Early-Modern Writing', unpub. Phd thesis, Loughborough University, 2012, 39.

²⁰ Delaval, 'Meditations and Prayers', 111.

²¹ Reginald Scot, The Discovery of Witchcraft (London, 1665), 138.

²² John Gerard, The Herbal or General History of Plants (London, 1633), 355. See Flesh and Spirit, cited above, 207, n. 32, for more detail on Gerard's comments.

²³ Hoffmann-Axthelm, History of Dentistry, 73.

For tis imposible she can have cunning enough (as it has been reported) to put worms into my mouth through the Quill, with which she takes them out.

I am sure she neither brought the Quill with her, nor did so much as make it, for it was made by one of my own servant's, and I plainly enough (as well as others) saw the worms stir (after she left me) in the water where she wash'd the quill that she open'd my Gum's withal.

Nay more, some curious people that were here took some of those litle worms out of the water to try if they had life, and when they were cut in peces we saw bloud, which was a certain proof that they were not little pieces of lutestring which some incredulous people used to say she might slip into my Mouth with the Quill with which she opened my Gum's, and so washing it in the Basin she might make those peces of strings move in the water, as if there were life in them; but these arguments were not made use of by any of those Persons who were Eye witnesses of the sudden cure that was wrought upon me.

In fine after all criticall Arguments I dare affirm it for a truth that worms have caused those torturing paines, my God has punished me withal and in his good time mercyfully removed.²⁴

In turning this episode into a meditation, Delaval was keen to give God the credit for both the pain and the providential appearance of the woman healer. She further wrote that the woman could not be a witch because

God forbid I shou'd ascribe such power to a wicked creature, as is only due to our Glorious Creator.

Tis at his word that the stormy winds arise, and not at the Command of a witch (as some do foolishly imagine), and 'tis God alone that can still the rageing of the sea.²⁵

The language that Delaval used resonates with Scot's description of a mistaken ascription of supernatural power to witchcraft:

Such faithless people (I say) are also persuaded, that neither hail nor snow, thunder nor lightning, rain nor tempestuous winds, come from the Heavens at the

²⁴ Delaval, 'Prayers and Meditations', 109-112.

²⁵ Delaval, 'Prayers and Meditations', p. 110.

commandement of God; but are raised by the cunning and power of Witches and Conjurers [...] But certainly, it is neither a Witch, nor Devil, but a glorious God that maketh the thunder.²⁶

The influence of both medical and spiritual texts upon this meditation is apparent. However, a letter which was read to the Royal Society in London on 20 June 1666, around the time Delaval claimed to have had this experience, might indicate that rather than being a personal one, that this anecdote was based on an incident which Delaval had either heard or read about into which she transposed herself as protagonist. The letter is entitled ‘A Letter from Mr De Lavall to Sir Theodore Mayerne, containing several Instances of the Skill of Sarah Hastings in extracting Worms from the Teeth, Gums, &c’, dated 14 December 1651.²⁷ This letter is also the subject of ‘Letter XXX’ in the first volume of Jean Cornand de Lacroze’s collection of Memoirs for the Ingenious (1693). ‘Letter XXX’ was published anonymously probably by the philosopher and clergyman Samuel Clarke, and was dedicated to Joseph Raphson, a mathematician and Fellow of the Royal Society. ‘Letter XXX’ was published anonymously by the philosopher and clergyman Samuel Clarke, and dedicated to Joseph Raphson, a mathematician and Fellow of the Royal Society.²⁸ The main concern of the letter is a description of an ‘uncommon’ tale of the work of Sarah Hastings, from Holme in Huntingdonshire.²⁹ Hastings’s skill was that she could diagnose toothworms instantly- as did Delaval’s unlearned woman- and then draw them out in ‘three or four minutes, using only the Quill of a Goose, or a Writing Pen’ without causing pain. She would then ‘threw the extracted Worms into a Glas of clean Water, where they appear’d to have a round and red head, the rest of the body being white’.³⁰ By the time of publication of ‘Letter XXX’ Sarah Hastings was long dead having been thought to have been sixty-five in 1651, to whom, Mr De Lavall claimed, she had and exclusively ‘communicated the Art’, in the technique and ‘was grown to be almost as exquisite as herself’ – whom the author suggests might now also be dead and if so might have taken the ‘important Secret’ of this act with her.³¹ ‘Letter XXX’

²⁶ Scot, The Discovery of Witchcraft, pp. 1-2.

²⁷ ‘Copy letter from Mr De Lavall to Sir Theodore Mayerne’ 14 December 1651 Royal Society MS LBO /31/103, pp. 299-305. It was read to the Society on 20 June 1666 and copied up into their letter book to be placed on record.

²⁸ J. De La Crose (ed.), Memoirs for the Ingenious [...] in Miscellaneous Letters (London, 1693), 222-230 (222). This text misdates the letter as 14 December 1641. Although anonymous, by reporting that he had recently translated Rohaults Mechanics into Latin (from French) it suggests it was Clarke as his translation would later be published, appearing as Jacobi Rohaulti Physica Latinè, in 1697.

²⁹ Memoirs for the Ingenious, 223.

³⁰ Memoirs for the Ingenious, 223.

³¹ MS LBO /31/103, 305; and Memoirs for the Ingenious, 224.

states that court physician Sir Theodore Mayerne, recipient of the original letter, had along with King Charles I, personally witnessed Hastings perform this treatment in 1642 at Whitehall, having proof of this under de Mayerne's 'own Hand and Cifer'.³² The letter tells of an event from around 1635 which happened at the home of Oliver St John, first earl of Bolingbroke in Bletsoe, Bedfordshire. It describes how the earl's granddaughter had a red spot on her lip that would not heal, until Hastings removed from it a worm. The quill used was a new one especially prepared by Bolingbroke's son, 'the Lady's' father, himself to prevent any 'pretence at Legerdemain [sleight of hand] by this 'Operatrix'.³³ If the incident happened in around 1635 as its author Mr J De Lavall stated, 'Lord *S. John*'s eldest daughter would have been aged nine-and-a-half. The letter then describes another treatment, performed on the letter-writer himself in around 1648. Mr J De Lavall described suffering from toothache for over a month. On consulting Hastings, she diagnosed a 'Worm or two lodged just under the Tooth affected': A classic case of a tooth appearing healthy from the outside, but being diseased within.³⁴ Working in just four minutes, Hastings removed the worms and the pain, displaying the worms to the assembled company on a trencher. Other stories related in the letter include the tale of Mary Barker who at just ten years old had been attended by 'excellent Surgeons' who could not cure her ulcers, but from whom Hastings extracted some sixty worms and cured.

he author of 'Letter XXX' was unable to identify de Mayerne's correspondent 'Mr J. De Laval' but inferred that he was a 'Letter'd man, and perhaps a Physician too'.³⁵ 'Letter XXX' describes the events as 'uncommon' meaning both unusual and rare suggesting a woman practising in this public way was extraordinary: no doubt the reason she had been called to 'perform' in front of the King. This rarity is corroborated by Colin Jones who has stated that evidence for women offering quack dental treatment is 'small'.³⁶ Similarly, Margaret A. Katritzky has found the occasional description of a woman healer carrying out dental care in early modern Europe.³⁷ So while the incident might have happened as described, it is possible instead that Elizabeth Delaval heard tales of Sarah Hastings while at court in the 1660s, since as Susan Wiseman has noted, 'Delaval's account of writing and

³² *Memoirs for the Ingenious*, 223

³³ *Memoirs for the Ingenious*, 225.

³⁴ *Memoirs for the Ingenious*, 224-6. Later the author refers to him as 'Mr. Delaval' (226).

³⁵ *Memoirs for the Ingenious*, 224-226. Later the author refers to him as 'Mr. Delaval' (226).

³⁶ Jones, 'Pulling Teeth in Eighteenth Century Paris', 126. Margaret A. Katritzky qualifies this by pointing out that Paris had thirty three registered dentists of whom women number just two (M. A. Katritzky, *Women, Medicine and Theatre, 1500-1750: Literary Mountebanks and Performing Quacks* (Aldershot, 2007), 177).

³⁷ Katritzky, *Women, Medicine and Theatre*, 170.

curating her manuscript comes in the aftermath of her experiences at court' and we know the account of Hastings was written up for the Royal Society just after Delaval's time there;³⁸ it is equally possible that the letter writer was connected to her husband's family, since as Douglas Greene, Wiseman, and others have asserted there is internal evidence in the surviving manuscript to support the idea that it was written up at a date after her first marriage, and that this letter existed in a copy at the Delaval family home, and had been read by Delaval as she revised her meditations.³⁹

One remarkable aspect of this letter (and indeed its later rehearsal by Samuel Clarke) is the seriousness with which the extraction of worms is reported. As Katritzky has shown 'in early modern figurative art and literature, tooth-drawers and their patients are often caricatured as figures of fun, near the bottom of the health-care hierarchy'.⁴⁰ As a widely-read young woman, Delaval would have encountered this trope, which adds weight to the hypothesis that she had had sight of this letter before writing up the meditation. A conflation of the events in this letter, with the substitution of one earl's daughter for another and of sixty worms for two hundred reinvigorates the tale. Written up by a mature woman from the collected notes of her younger self, the meditations reveal a 'layered version of her former selves'.⁴¹ Wiseman's important recent essay revisiting Delaval's memoirs in a Jacobite context show it to be an even more complex document than was previously understood, one which offers 'a politicised retelling of an earlier life'.⁴² The fact that the toothache story might be an embellishment of an episode which happened to the daughter of a different earl in its first iteration adds to the complexity of this manuscript volume. Identifying and living with the Stuarts in exile, perhaps the intertwining her biography with an episode from an earlier Stuart court was part of this political positioning. However, that the toothache episode might have been based on another's experience does not detract from its skill as a literary anecdote to be used for Anglican religious reflection.

³⁸ Susan Wiseman, 'Elizabeth Delaval's *Memoirs and Mediations*: Textual Transmission and Jacobite Context' in *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (2015) 10 (1): 68-92 (72-73).

³⁹ Greene (ed) *The Meditations of Lady Elizabeth Delaval*; Wiseman, 'Elizabeth Delaval's *Memoirs and Mediations*, 78.

⁴⁰ Katritzky, *Women, Medicine and Theatre*, 178.

⁴¹ Eckerle, *Romancing the Self*, 139.

⁴² Wiseman, 'Elizabeth Delaval's *Memoirs and Mediations*, 91.