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''Our people die well'': Deathbed scenes in John Wesley's *Arminian* magazine

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Abstract
John Wesley established the *Arminian* magazine in 1778. It ceased publication in 1969, by which time it had become the longest-running religious periodical in Western history. The diverse content of its first issues included several narrations of the last days and hours of various good Methodists. By attention to the growing number of death scenes that appeared in the *Arminian* magazine between 1778 and Wesley's death in 1791, this paper seeks to reconstruct the constitution of the Methodist framework of holy death and, in so doing, make a contribution to the way historians understand religious movements. It argues that those engaged in holy dying behaved in ways designed to demonstrate their assurance of salvation to themselves, their families and friends, and to God. Biographers of the moribund then made additional embellishments and omissions designed to further perfect these tableaux and maximize their utility to those Christian readers looking for ready proofs that they themselves would go to heaven. Exploring the methods used to make these potentially morbid accounts as appealing as possible to a diverse national readership, we can gain a sense of how Wesley used the new technologies of mass communication to inculcate a feeling of community between readers while at the same time using this new channel as a tool of religious instruction.

Keywords: *Methodism, deathbed, mass communication, genre theory*

Introduction

''The best of all, God is with us!'' John Wesley repeated these words repeatedly during his final days (Wesley, 1938). Wearing his belief like a badge of holy triumph, Wesley, who died in March 1791, punctuated his death with a series of such exclamations, demonstrating both his faith in God's promise of salvation and his own spiritual readiness to embrace death and pass into the next world. Having witnessed the deaths of many of his friends and co-religionists, and having read and edited for publication descriptions of hundreds more, John Wesley was highly conversant in the language people used to express themselves as they reached their last moments. Indeed, as this essay will argue, Wesley's career as the editor and figurehead of a Methodist magazine that came to publish large numbers of deathbed scenes not only shaped the way he envisioned what constituted a good, holy death, but also served to construct and disseminate a Methodist vision of the perfect death to a growing national readership. Drawing on the 152 non-serialized accounts of deathbed scenes published in the *Arminian* magazine during its formative years between its first issue in

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January 1778 and 1791, the year in which Wesley died, we can determine the constitution of the Methodist framework of holy death. By focusing on the construction and maintenance of what became an important genre of Methodist writing, this paper seeks to probe the particular significance of dying to this denomination and, in so doing, make a contribution to the way historians understand religious movements.

One of the hardest questions facing historians of religion is how to deal with the issue of belief. In the past, historians have frequently sought to understand adherence to religious doctrines by recourse to economic, social, and emotional explanations. Rationalizing to the point of reduction, it is has proved tempting for some historians to explain religious beliefs without recognition of the reasonable steps toward faith made by all those who follow a religious tradition. This paper seeks, in some small way, to redress this imbalance in historiographical causation. In my view, the appearance and particular presentation of death-scenes in the *Arminian* magazine served to bridge an important gap for all those struggling with their beliefs. Those engaged in holy dying behaved in ways designed to demonstrate their assurance of salvation to themselves, their families and friends, and to God. The diverse group of Methodist itinerants, family members, and friends who submitted their descriptions of these death-scenes for edifying publication in the *Arminian* magazine then made additional embellishments and omissions designed to further perfect these tableaux and maximize their utility to those Christian readers looking for ready proofs that they themselves would go to heaven. For readers who doubted the efficacy of Wesley's abstract promise of universal redemption, death scenes seemed to provide repeated, tangible proof that those who accepted Christ into their hearts, rejected the devil, and searched their hearts for sin and found nothing, went directly to heaven.

Exploring the methods used to make these potentially morbid accounts as appealing as possible to a diverse national readership, we can gain a sense of how Wesley used the new technologies of mass communication to inculcate a feeling of community between readers while using this new channel as a tool of religious instruction. Beginning with an analysis of the role and success of denominational periodicals such as the *Arminian* magazine in the late eighteenth century, this paper examines why death proved such a potent theme in literature and then considers why and how it came to be deployed with such vigor as a literary and rhetorical device in Wesley's magazine.

The *Arminian* magazine

The collapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 wrought profound changes upon English society. Deregulation of laws pertaining to the publication of various kinds of printed material allowed anyone with the will and the means to publish to do so (Herbert, 1940). The result was the establishment of a growing number of newspapers and periodicals designed to cater to the needs of a public becoming increasingly familiar with print and its uses. By the eighteenth century, expanded intellectual activity, the consequence of improved means of communication, more widespread education, and the French and Industrial Revolutions, had served to greatly increase the size and appetite of the English reading public. Benefiting from substantially reduced costs of mass production, publishers responded with a rising tide of print. As one of many new genres of print that rose in number and popularity over the course of the eighteenth century, magazines came to serve markets both general and specialized and brought readers together into newly imagined communities based on common interest rather than physical proximity and contact (Anderson, 1983).

Beginning in the early 1700s, the verve and vigor of magazines such as *Tatler* and *The Spectator* created national readerships for serial-format print (Collins, 1927; Graham, 1926).

Never slow to take advantage of an opportunity presented by new media, organized religions were among the first and most successful groups to establish printed periodicals and distribute them to a large and loyal readership. Their motivation in doing so was to extend and reinforce their ministries by adding another channel to their already multifaceted means of outreach. Highly organized religious movements like Methodism and certain strands of Calvinism were already making use of mechanisms as diverse as field preaching, schools, folk medicine, lending societies, and publishing houses to spread their beliefs across the country; regular periodical publication, however, offered particular advantages (Rogal, 1984). Most importantly, journals could be distributed widely, perhaps beyond the reach of traditional preaching methods. In addition to its potential geographical range, serial publication offered the possibility of reaching those classes of people not normally affected by intricate theological arguments, however presented. As the editor of one such religious magazine argued, if suitably concise and entertaining, the contents of such journals could provide edification and instruction on religious subjects "for those whose circumstances would otherwise grasp none at all" (Gospel Magazine, 1774, I: 1, p. iv).

The monthly *Arminian Magazine: Consisting of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption* was first published in 1778 in an effort to counter the predestinarian doctrines of Wesley's Calvinist rivals who had already established magazines of their own. As its subtitle suggested, Wesley's *Arminian* was to serve as a textbook on the theme of universal redemption and an invitation to all to accept Christ. On almost every page there appeared an exemplary reminder of the Wesleyan understanding of Arminianism that "God willeth all men to be saved, by speaking the truth in love" (Arminian, 1778, I: 1, p. iv). Laying out the proposed format of his magazine, Wesley kept this theme of universal salvation to the fore. Each issue would consist of four parts, the first a theological defense of this doctrine (Arminian, 1778, I: 1, p. v). "Secondly", Wesley continued, "An extract from the life of some holy man, whether Lutheran, Church of England, Calvinist, or Arminian. Thirdly, Accounts and Letters, containing the experience of pious persons, the greatest part of whom are still alive: and, Fourthly, Verses explaining or confirming the capital doctrines we have in view" (Arminian, 1778, I: 1, pp. v–vi).

Wesley exerted a phenomenal degree of personal control over the content of the magazine, both as editor and author. Devoting the last thirteen years of his long life to the publication, Wesley personally compiled and edited each month's edition until his death at age 88. While employing Thomas Olivers as "Corrector of the Press" from 1776 to 1793, Wesley's autocratic scrutiny was such that at the end of the ninth volume, published in 1786, Wesley included his own list of errata, eight pages in all (Mathews, 1949, p. 171). Moreover, he was responsible for the authorship of a good deal of the magazine's contents. A typical issue might include a reproduction of a Wesley sermon, a serialization of one of his longer tracts, and a piece of general writing on some religious subject written specially for the magazine, as well as comments and introductions to many other inclusions and substantial amounts of personal correspondence. He was also the author of a significant number of the biographical sketches of notable Methodist preachers and the witness and recorder at several of the deathbed scenes that began to appear in the magazine after 1780. Thus, although the magazine contained valuable contributions from correspondents from every corner of the British Isles and sometimes beyond, the shape and tone of the magazine and, indeed, the ultimate decisions as to what was included and discarded were Wesley's responsibility.

Indeed, as Wesley advanced in years, as his eyesight and limbs began to fail him, he was forced to limit the frequency and intensity of his preaching and visiting tours and reduce the number of daily sermons to a more manageable amount (Rogal, 1987). Instead he devoted more and more time to this new venture, a magazine that would carry his voice and his

message where his legs no longer could. And carry it did. While gauging the success of periodicals of this time is a notoriously imprecise science, we have a few pieces of evidence that indicate that the *Arminian* was bought and read by large numbers of people. Contents pages proudly proclaimed that the magazine was "sold at the New Chapel, City-Road, and by all the Booksellers in Town and Country" (Arminian, 1778, I: 1, back page). Such sales were likely to those with little or no denominational adherence to Methodism, as the majority of sales were probably achieved through another channel. The research of H. F. Mathews reveals that copies of the magazine were brought to the weeknight preaching services by the Methodist itinerants with whom Wesley was in regular contact. At these meetings, copies of the *Arminian* were distributed and sold to those present alongside other religious books (Mathews, 1949, p. 169–170). Edward Martin has suggested that, at the time of Wesley's death, the total number of copies sold at these and other venues was around 7,000 (Arminian, 1790, XIII: Preface, p. iii; Martin, 1900, p. 90). As Thomas Walter Herbert has commented, however, while this is a fairly large number, "it is not an adequate representation of the reading public the journal reached" (Herbert, 1940, p. 44).

While circulation figures of this type constitute a useful insight into the extent of printing in England at this time, they can provide little more than a clue to the actual size of the readership that these magazines would have attracted. Indeed, I would suggest that for publications of this nature its circulation (seen as a function of its cost to the consumer), bore an inverse relation to the number of people who read or heard the contents of each issue. The shilling charged for the *Arminian* meant that the magazine was unlikely to have been an impulse purchase and thus its circulation was perhaps lower than its cheaper rivals. Given its relative expense, it was not uncommon for two or more peasant families to put their savings together to purchase copies. Once saved for and acquired, Wesley's magazine assumed a prized status in Methodist homes. In his memoirs, Thomas Jackson, who was later to assume Wesley's role as the magazine's editor, recalled how his father, in order to inculcate a taste for reading of this nature, resolved to bind in calf a volume of the magazine for each of his children (Jackson, 1874). However they were bound, these magazines were read intensively and repeatedly by their purchasers and by up to 20 or 30 families and friends. On this basis, one could safely estimate a total readership in the region of 100,000. Whatever the precise figures for readership, as Wesley had hoped the magazine was distributed and sold at meetings the length and breadth of Britain. Published correspondence from professed readers came from all over the country, though most heavily from London and the Methodist strongholds of Bristol and Lincolnshire.

Holy dying

Measured by many indicators, not least its longevity, the *Arminian* was a success. Much of this accomplishment was due to Wesley's sensitivity to the tastes of his readers. Indeed, while the format of the magazine remained, at least during Wesley's lifetime, largely true to the template he had set out during in its first issue, Wesley made several key changes over the years, usually at the request or complaint of his readers. Having received favorable notices following a trial run the previous November, in 1781 Wesley committed to regularly including "part of the Life of some of those real Christians, who, having faithfully served God in their generation, have lately finished their course with joy" (Arminian, 1781, IV: 1, p. 1). In practice, such stories placed considerable emphasis on the closing days and hours of these lives. These deathbed scenes, apparently in response to reader interest and a growing number of suitable submissions, became more and more prominent in the following decade with the number of published scenes rising from an average of eight per year between 1780

and 1782 to around 17 per year, more than double, between 1789 and 1791. No other section of the magazine rose with such distinction, suggesting that, at the very least, death packed an unequaled emotional punch. Indeed, the moment of death has always held people in rapt attention and, whether fact or fiction, accounts of final moments have continually sold well (Auerbach, 1990; Holubetz, 1986; James, 1980; Kastenbaum, 1989; Reed, 1975). "The truth of it is", Joseph Addison wrote in *The Spectator* of January 31, 1712, "there is nothing in history which is so improving to the reader, as those accounts which we meet with of the deaths of eminent persons, and of their behavior in that dreadful season" (Smithers, 1968).

Much popular fascination with deathbed scenes derives from the seemingly timeless belief that the dying receive a clearer revelation of truth and a supernatural insight into the future. Momentarily lingering on the borderlands of two worlds, "why may they not, when just leaving the one, catch some glimpses of the other?" (Clark, 1851). As Karl S. Guthke has remarked, "finality commands attention" and dying words, then, assume a cherished importance (Guthke, 1992). In fact, death proved a great leveller as even the poorest soul could assume authority on the basis of dying revelation. Perceived both as the first and last opportunity for men and women to communicate a genuine insight into life and afterlife, the words of dying persons were invested with profound significance. For Christians then, death was not solely the event of physical cessation but the portal to a new level of existence that was to last for eternity. Given the magnitude of this transition, the circumstances of death assumed monumental importance. Nevertheless, there were profound differences in the significance different denominations invested in the final moments of earthly life. Calvinists, for instance, believed that it was not the business of humans to anticipate whether God would send them to heaven or hell. In contrast, followers of John Wesley subscribed to a doctrine of perfectibility. Believing that human beings could follow Christ's commands and become perfectly free from sin, they concluded themselves irrevocably assured of salvation. A peaceful and graceful death was, Methodists believed, a sure sign of this deliverance. Their belief in God's promise of universal redemption for all repentants meant that the minutes, hours, and days before death were a crucial proving ground for those who did not yet feel fully assured of their salvation (Cecil, 1982). An unassured soul could look forward only to an eternity of fiery damnation in hell whereas, for those who successfully rid their hearts of sin, "the exemplary manner in which they met their death was the ultimate proof that they were indeed saved" (Cecil, 1982). With the stakes so high, relatives, friends, and preachers gathered eagerly round the deathbed for some final intimation of the dying person's ultimate destination. Thus, because Calvinists had no use for such anti-predestinarian narratives in their religious periodicals, Wesley's inclusion of deathbed scenes in the *Arminian* was an important means of highlighting a central doctrinal difference between Methodism and its rivals. Yet while death assumed a peculiar importance in Methodist soteriology, Wesley's emphasis on the significance of holy dying was hardly an original concept. Rather, it was Wesley's adaptation of a pre-existing genre that proved unique.

Many scholars have tracked the emergence and development of the *Ars moriendi* tradition in the course of the later Middle Ages, a branch of meditational literature made famous in England by Jeremy Taylor, that offered schooling in the art of dying (Taylor, 1651). As Sister Mary Catherine O'Connor has explained, *Ars moriendi* writings flowered from an early fifteenth century work by the Parisian scholar Jean de Gerson and came to comprise "a complete and intelligible guide to the business of dying, a method learned while one is in good health and kept at one's finger ends for use in that all important and inescapable hour" (O'Conner, 1942). During Wesley's time at Oxford it is likely that he encountered one of

the 13 copies of the original *Ars moriendi* that catalogues show were circulating in college and university libraries at that time (O'Conner, 1942). More likely still, Wesley probably read Taylor's Holy Dying (1651) or another *Ars moriendi* derivative. The marks of this genre are unmistakable in Wesleyan deathbed scenes. The only difference is of representational aspect. While de Gerson and Taylor favored the instructional discursive style, Wesley educates through narrative, thereby alluding to a growing corpus of deathbed scenes that had begun to appear in sermons, biographies, diaries, and other writings in the mid-eighteenth century (Houlbrooke, 1998). Making Methodist deathbed scenes the centerpiece of a religious serial, however, was a decision perhaps also inspired by the contemporary fascination with the dying moments of the historian and philosopher David Hume. Dying in a state of utmost secular tranquility and composure in 1776, Hume's atheistic serenity marked a demonstration of peaceful death without religion. The publication of an account of his death by his friend Adam Smith triggered a pamphlet war in which Christians replied with many sophisticated responses attempting to differentiate between the apparent equanimity of Hume's last hours and the vibrant sense of joy and peace that could be enjoyed by true professors of religion (Horne, 1777). The deathbed scenes that began to appear in the *Arminian* in 1780 may be understood as one facet of a diverse array of often contradictory responses to Hume's death. In this case, the Methodist reply came in the form of imitation. Mimicking the narrative nature of Smith's critique of organized religion, Wesleyan accounts of death took the genre of *Ars moriendi* instructional writing to a new, exemplary level. Looking more closely at the nature of this emulation will serve to explicate both the particular importance of death and dying to Methodists and the extraordinary popularity of literary descriptions of Methodist death in the *Arminian* magazine. For this purpose, the next section will follow the course of a typical deathbed scene, focusing on the elements that the moribund and their biographers chose to suppress, the components they chose to emphasize, and the meaning with which they invested each ritual of holy dying.

Performing death

Published accounts of holy death served, in microcosm, the same purposes as the magazine of which they formed an increasingly dominant part. Deathbed scenes were included and selected to promote conversion, theological instruction, pious living, and holy dying in ways that created and cemented a sense of Methodist community across the nation and beyond. Thus, they were couched in a plain and simple descriptive language designed to be understood by even the most uneducated of readers (Arminian, 1784, VII: Preface). To further resonate with the broadest possible cross-section of society, accounts of holy death were stripped of specifics, to the extent that Wesleyan deathbed scenes closely resembled each other. Moreover, those who featured in descriptions of holy death were, by and large, ordinary members of the Methodist laity, selected for inclusion in the *Arminian* not on the basis of their social station or vocation but on the exemplary nature of their death. Only 19 of 152 dying persons who appear in the magazine between 1778 and 1791 are itinerant preachers. Indeed, seeking both to represent and to appeal to the large numbers of women sympathetic to the Methodist religion, a robust 46 per cent of dying persons were female, a much higher proportion than that found in Methodist or Calvinist biographies of living persons. Furthermore, Wesley took particular care to include accounts of the deaths of pious children among the pages of his magazines. Representing approximately 15 per cent of descriptions in which the dying person's age can be identified or surmised, the presence of children less than 15 years old in the *Arminian* reflected Wesley's belief that they were capable of devout piety. By providing examples of young children experiencing conversion and dying

holy deaths that could be read aloud to youngsters, Wesley attempted to reach out to the young believers whom he considered to be the vital future of the Methodist revival movement, in order to encourage them into a state of Christian perfection (Willhauck, 1992). Sending the correct message was essential. Whether the subject was a young girl or an old man, accounts were selected for publication on the basis of what they contributed to an understanding of Methodism and holy death. Although the majority were authored by members of the Methodist laity, the emphasis Wesley placed on a suitable demonstration of the doctrine of universal redemption meant that almost one-third of published accounts were written by itinerant preachers, many of whom, like John Pawson and Alexander Mather, contributed more than once. Indeed, the most frequently published witness to deathbed scenes was Wesley himself, who appeared as author no less than six times between 1782 and 1783 alone. To further heighten a sense of pathos, Wesley also included occasional poignant accounts authored by close relatives of the deceased.

Many of the first dying scenes to appear in the early 1780s were composed much earlier, as private correspondence to John Wesley written in the 1740s, 1750s, and 1760s. As the magazine became more firmly established, however, and began to generate its own correspondence independent of Wesley, more and more fresh accounts of holy death were submitted and published, usually within a year of receipt. Thus, by the time of the publication of the seventh volume in 1784, and lasting until the death of Wesley in 1791, the vast majority of accounts came from witnesses to the recently deceased. While the first accounts had been written in textual isolation from each other, their publication in early editions of the magazine gave later authors a template of how to construct and write a publishable dying scene. As authors became increasingly exposed to previously published dying scenes, their own creativity seems to have become subsumed by an increasing awareness of the essential common features of effective writing in this emerging genre. By recourse to an increasingly homogeneous menu of images, symbols, and themes, Wesley and his contributors slowly created a formula of literary conventions (Cawelti, 1976). From a different perspective, we might argue that as more and more people read more and more deathbed accounts they internalized the implicit instructions presented in these passages and enacted them at their own deaths. When these deaths were recorded they reinforced what was becoming a formulaic genre of religious writing.

Certainly, by the time of Wesley's death in March 1791, these narratives had taken on a relatively conventionalized appearance that persisted for many years. Each case implicitly directed that the dying person must engage in praying both for themselves and their survivors, search their soul for sin, and banish any evil they find. They must repent all their past misdeeds, commend their soul to God, and surrender their life and their spirit to God's will, leaving the Almighty to determine their fate. The ways that such instructions were presented in these narratives are thus centrally important if we are to fully comprehend the significance and effectiveness of death scenes in the *Arminian*.

Methodist accounts of death present a particular view of the traumas of biological cessation. Directing the reader's attention to the spiritual significance of the event and the mental preparations being made by the dying, Methodist descriptions of death emphasize these elements by downplaying any attention paid to the cause of physical decline and to the biological symptoms that different modes of death generated. In almost half of these scenes, the authors preferred to leave the cause of death unmentioned, while in the majority of other descriptions, vague, general terms such as "illness" or "disorder" were held accountable for the demise of their subject. This appears as part a coordinated attempt to universalize the message embedded in these individual reports, an agenda reinforced by those authors who chose to comment on why such afflictions had targeted these good Christians.

Unanimously, they recast these myriad illnesses as the product of a common condition. In each case, they wrote, the illness was the manifestation of God's will.

Dreaming that he was praying, the 7-year-old Thomas Spear, afflicted with a disorder that putrefied his flesh and reduced his lower extremities "till the bones dropped out", saw a vision of God and asked of Him, "Lord wilt thou cure my leg! But the Lord said, Hush child! I am going to take thee to myself. Thou shalt die and go to heaven" (Arminian, 1788, XI: 1, pp. 18–21). Arguing that such deaths had discernible divine purpose, these authors explained how God, seeking to draw particular people back to His fold, struck them down so they might live with Him again in heaven. This agenda continued beyond references to the cause of illness; in case after case in which evidence of physical pain is manifest it is employed for spiritual effect. Dying persons would often remark that their afflictions, while severe, were nothing in comparison with their spiritual torment as they prepared to meet their maker, or the much greater agonies endured by Christ on the cross. Indeed, for many, the promise of their salvation and their firm belief in the love of Jesus allowed them to endure physical suffering. As Mrs Doyle told those gathered around her, "I bless the Lord, I am not afraid of the strongest pain" (Arminian, 1782, V: 12, pp. 462–463).

While rarely succumbing to the agonies of their physical afflictions, many Methodists felt temptation of a different kind. Methodists believed Satan, preying on the physically weak, was always close at hand trying to snatch souls for his own. Some believers fared better than others: those most assured of their salvation felt a sense of God's protection, envisioning his love as a shield which the Devil could not pierce. Sarah Bulgin, for instance, blessing the Lord for putting Satan at a distance, ridiculed the devil's efforts, declaring "I now find thy darts are of no avail" (Arminian, 1787, X: 8, pp. 410–412). While several dying Methodists perceived a warrior Jesus shackling or banishing their tempter, far more felt the Devil close at hand, maybe crouching at the bed's foot or up "against the ceiling" (Arminian, 1787, X: 2, pp. 75–76). In the case of Caster Garrett, the devil seemed to have found a particularly vulnerable target. Feeling the action of Satan upon him, Garrett cried out, "I am undone! undone! I have lost my way! The Lord is departed from me! O, it was all lies I was telling!" (Arminian, 1787, X: 1, pp. 18–21). These crises and conflicts, which usually lasted for less than 24 hours, were always successfully negotiated. In this case as in many others, their undoing served only to redouble the efforts of dying persons to find true assurance. Having been comforted and counselled by a pious friend to fully confess his sins, Garrett slowly rebuilt his faith in God's love and forgiveness. "God is faithful and just!" he later assured those gathered around him. Then stamping his foot, he said "Satan! I stamp thee under my feet!" (Arminian, 1787, X: 1, pp. 18–21). Ultimately snatched from the hands of the devil, this sequence of doubt followed by faith, weakness followed by strength, temptation followed by defiance, was an important stage in the preparations for many holy deaths.

Having found definitive assurance of salvation, Methodists' next temptation was impatience. For many, consumed with a love of God that followed from a belief in their own assurance, their continued stay on earth was a source of frustration. "Why!" Ann Ritson asked, "O why are thy chariot wheels so long in coming! Come sweet Jesus come quickly!" (Arminian, 1788, XI: 12, pp. 630–635). Indeed, in a handful of cases dying persons complained that the efficacy of the prayers of friends and family was proving sufficient to delay their deaths. Mrs Trotter, for instance, was pleased to find her spirit gently slipping away only to be roused from her fit by what she believed to be the prayers of her husband, who knelt beside her. She reproved him gently but firmly: "My dear, it was cruel, it was cruel; I was just entering the threshold, and you have prayed me back to life" (Arminian, 1791, XIV: 5, pp. 235–241). More often, however, such impatience was held in check as many dying persons recognized the temptation to wish actively for death and

feared, like Mrs Harcourt of Bristol, that they "should too earnestly desire to depart" (Arminian, 1791, XIV: 11, pp. 557–562).

At the opposite extreme, authors were also keen to demonstrate that good Methodists were willing and able to relinquish their ties to this world before proceeding to the next. Some were hopeful of recovery, anxious to continue the work of God on earth. For instance, in the case of Hannah Kay, "she seemed rather desirous of recovering . . . that she might be more useful in the Church of God" (Arminian, 1788, XI: 7, pp. 355–357). More common, however, was the concern among authors and visitors alike that dying persons divest themselves of any emotional attachments to their family that might render them reluctant to die. In response, many dying Methodists demonstrated that they had made adequate preparations. Indeed, a recurrent manifestation of the effect of heavenly assurance upon the souls of dying persons was a freedom from anxiety regarding their families (Arminian, 1780, III: 3, pp. 592–601). This sequence of trust and release was reciprocal; authors often described how family members, convinced of the imminent salvation of their relatives, bade them cheerful farewells (Arminian, 1788, XI: 9, pp. 461–465). For instance, Caster Garrett's wife said to her dying husband, "I am willing to part with you; for you are God's, and not mine. I freely give you up to him" (Arminian, 1787, X: 1, pp. 18–21). Attempting to further probe the strength of the religious beliefs of dying persons, many visitors inquired whether religious preparations had allowed them to overcome their fears of death itself. In each case, and in others that did not require such prompting, those engaged in the business of holy dying responded in words similar to those of Thomas Wadsworth. Challenging an implication made by a companion, Wadsworth replied that the promise of salvation "hath taken all the terror of death quite away from me" (Arminian, 1785, VIII: 9, pp. 461–464).

Even in descriptions in which subjects did not articulate their resolution to face death without fear, their courage was evidenced by other means. Reporting the demise of John Tregallas in St Agnes in Cornwall in 1785, the itinerant preacher Joseph Taylor recorded an encounter he had with the physician following Tregallas' death. "[H]e told me after", Taylor recalled, "that what he had seen and heard had confirmed him in one point wherein he had been wavering, viz. whether a person could in this life, be wholly delivered from the fear of death?" (Arminian, 1786, IX: 5, pp. 249–252). Whether explicitly verbalized or implicitly demonstrated, every scene reinforced the same message: death "formerly so dreadful" lost its sting when confronted by God's victory over evil and the promise of salvation (Arminian, 1788, XI: 6, pp. 297–298). Indeed, for some dying persons assured that they would be reawakened in paradise, the act of dying was akin to falling peacefully asleep; while for others, death was "a wholesome messenger" full of glad tidings of what was to follow (Arminian, 1788, XI: 9, pp. 461–465). In case after case, dying persons, having wrestled with their consciences and reconciled their desire to join God with their emotional ties to their family.

Convinced that their condition was God's will, dying persons learned to be patient and to submit themselves to His control. For some, like Benjamin Wood of Sheffield, who was "quite resigned to live or die", this manifested itself in a position of considered ambivalence (Arminian, 1783, VI: 8, pp. 414–415). Most others, while expressing a strong preference for death and the beginnings of a life in paradise, were content to acquiesce to God's wishes, whatever they might be (Arminian, 1783, VI: 6, pp. 305–306). Suicide had no place in these narratives: when asked how she was, Ann Dunn who was confined to her bed by a fever, replied, "If it was the will of the Lord, I would rather choose to be gone. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, O Lord, be done" (Arminian, 1783, VI: 3, pp. 128–129). Others demanded more immediate release, "if it was the Lord's will" (Arminian, 1782, V: 4, pp. 183–184). For dying persons suffering the physical discomfort endured by Miss Griffiths of

Knowles, dissolution could not come soon enough. "If it be thy will (she would often say) O take me now! but if not, thy will be done!" (Arminian, 1788, XI: 10, pp. 519–521).

With the rhetorical emphasis so tightly focused around the dying persons' patience in the face of imminent death, the presence and actions of physicians was somewhat incongruous. Medical professionals of one sort of another attended in almost all deathbed illnesses in English towns and cities in the late eighteenth century, yet doctors only appeared in 15 per cent of descriptions of holy dying in the *Arminian*. Indeed, one author delighted in exposing the fundamental contradiction of a doctor's attempts to cure a person preparing for a holy death. Having administered some drops to make her sleep, the doctor, "thinking it might afford her some satisfaction told Martha Brewton that there was hope of her recovery; but she replied, I do not want to live" (Arminian, 1787, X: 10, pp. 518–520). When doctors appeared in these narratives it was usually to offer, not diagnosis, but prognosis or treatment. Serving a dramatic function, authors' descriptions of doctors' visits generally focused on their forecast of the precise, usually imminent, moment of death; when John Tregallas enquired what his physician thought of his condition, he replied, "You will not be many hours here" (Arminian, 1786, IX: 5, pp. 249–252). When invited to attempt to relieve or cure the dying persons, eighteenth century physicians responded with a range of treatments included bleeding, the pulling of teeth, induced vomiting, diet-drinks, and sleeping drops. Very few of these, as Methodist authors reported it, had any positive effect. Indeed, these authors seemed to take some small pleasure in describing the inefficacy and inadequacy of medical attempts to prolong life in the face of God's decision to draw it to a worthy close.

Before their final curtain was drawn, dying persons took the opportunity to further demonstrate the strength of their religious devotion by exhorting those gathered around them. Over one-quarter of accounts feature direct deathbed admonishments to survivors. Dying persons most commonly encouraged those already walking along the path to God or, like Matthew Lamplough, lectured the careless or carefree by "exhorting and persuading them to believe and love the Lord Jesus Christ" (Arminian, 1790, XIII: 1, pp. 15–17). In the former cases, dying persons frequently offered prayers to friends, family, the Methodist Society, and its leaders, most particularly Wesley. Addressing those already active in the Methodist faith, they would offer long, joyous testimonies to God's love, frequently punctuated by hymn singing. In the second type of address, dying persons would use all their rhetorical powers to persuade their less pious listeners and, by extension, their readers of the importance of repentance. As John Tregallas told an acquaintance, "You must prepare to meet the Lord. If you do not alter your present course of life, you are undone for ever!" (Arminian, 1786, IX: 5, pp. 249–252). For others closer to hand, dying persons believed that the stakes were even higher. Ann Ritson, desiring to prepare her uncle to meet her in heaven, offered familial honor as an incentive, saying "I shall soon be there! and it will be an awful thing if at last some of the same family be found in heaven and some in hell!" (Arminian, 1788, XI: 12, pp. 630–635) Indeed, while the concern to spread the word of God was obvious in each and every exhortation, the desperate urgency evident in addresses to friends and family was particularly poignant. Having urged his wife "much to seek the Lord", William Stafford took her by the hand and with his last breaths asked her "Must I leave you unconverted!" (Arminian, 1783, VI: 5, pp. 249–250).

Whatever the particulars of circumstance and station, each account shared a common arena in which these religious rituals were enacted. Confined to their beds, each dying person used the bedroom as a theater in which to perform. Central and permanent, beds provided a stage around which spectators and participants could gather. Indeed, so intrinsic was it that many authors seemed to be influenced by the bed in the way they characterized the process of

passing on. In one out of every three accounts the metaphor used to describe death was that of slumber. In case after case, such as that of Samuel Newman in 1789, the dying person "fell asleep in Jesus" (Arminian, 1790, XIII: 9, pp. 465–476). Furthermore, in several accounts, the bed was deployed not solely as a place of slumber but a site, for women at least, of romantic comfort. For example, having said farewell to her gathered friends and family, Mrs Boardman "fell asleep in the arms of her Beloved" (Arminian, 1783, VI: 9, pp. 472–473). In a further handful of deathbed scenes, the bed became a site of something more. Envisioning Christ not simply as Saviour and comforter but as bridegroom, deathbeds became, at least by implication, marriage beds. Reconfiguring the day of their death as their wedding day, several dying persons made last minute preparations for what they believed would be their "happiest day" (Arminian, 1790, XIII: 7, pp. 365–372).

Further analysis of the metaphors used to describe the moment of passing reveals additional gendered patterns. Descriptions of dying can be divided into three further principal categories of metaphor: "flight", "departure", and "surrender". The deaths of men were only two-thirds as likely to be described in terms of falling asleep as were the deaths of women. Inversely, women were only two-thirds as likely to be described as "departing this life" or "surrendering their soul". While the pattern is hardly definitive, it suggests that Methodists inferred gendered connotations from certain metaphors of death. A man was considered godly if he "yielded up his soul into the hands of God", resigning himself to the divine will. Enacting a transfer of power and authority, men died a holy death by surrendering their prized independence to a heavenly Master. In contrast, male writers believed that the concept of surrender carried less significance in women's lives as they perceived women as largely devoid of individual authority. Rather, it seemed more appropriate that descriptions of women's death should emphasize their non-threatening, passive, almost romantic relations to the figures of (male) power in their lives. The description of the death of Mrs Spencer, who "fell asleep in the arms of Jesus" was typical in its evocation of a female's gentle slide into tranquility (Arminian, 1787, X: 6, pp. 300–301).

The lessons of holy dying

The evidence gathered from these 152 deathbed scenes suggests that Methodists understood and followed a distinct program of preparations to be made if a dying person was to expire in a manner befitting someone assured of salvation.

While the exact structure and performance of these mini-rituals varied from person to person and between authors there are, as we have seen, a number of features so common to Methodist dying scenes that they can be understood as essential practices. To use an analogy employed by writers in the *Ars moriendi* tradition on which these narratives are clearly founded, we can understand these practices as demonstrations that the dying person had overcome the threat of five distinct sequential temptations that befell him as he approached death (Lockyer, 1969). First, to conquer the temptation of unbelief, faith had to be maintained at all costs. Often perceiving themselves to be locked in physical or emotional combat with the devil, dying persons thwarted his efforts to cloud their mind with delusion, distraction, and doubt. Second, despair had to be avoided. Tormented by considerable physical suffering and often exhausted from their struggles with the devil and their wrestling with God, dying persons strove to resist sorrow by attempting to transcend their sufferings. Whether ignoring their physical discomforts or lessening them through comparison with Jesus' greater sufferings, dying Methodists clung to the pity and mercy of God, rarely succumbing to their frailties. Third, impatience had to be disavowed. Having found assurance in God's mercy, many dying Methodists felt the temptation to long for death.

Recognizing their weakness, they called to God for strength and tried to resign themselves to His will. Fourth, complacence had to be eschewed. Those conceited by their feelings of salvation were counseled to search their soul for sin in order to find true assurance. Others found themselves visited by a healthy doubt that led them to a second, wholehearted repentance. Finally, dying persons had to willingly renounce their earthly ties and possessions to demonstrate not only a readiness for death but a love for Jesus that surpassed their terrestrial affections.

Allied with these responses to the five temptations, dying persons also frequently used their last moments and the attention that their circumstances commanded, to give witness to the faith and to pray for and exhort those to be left behind to search their own souls and begin to prepare themselves for their own death. Methodist deathbed scenes were written and published to provide practical examples of universal redemption. This is reflected not only in the subject matter of these narratives but in the style of writing adopted by most authors. Ministers and family members alike wrote in a way designed to emphasize the dramas and crises of these last moments in order to most powerfully excite their readers' emotions and empathy. Indeed, the sequential progression through a series of temptations is melodrama par excellence (Cawelti, 1976). As they moved their readers' attention hurriedly but persuasively from one psychomachic crisis to the next, these melodramatists steadily built up suspense until the final blissful triumph of true faith and the banishment of doubt, despair, haste, complacence, and worldliness.

To further enforce this sense of triumphal victory, authors made much of the visions experienced by those close to death. For those not yet swayed by dying persons' repeated testimonies of assurance, several dying persons provided further proof of their salvation by testifying to having deathbed foresight of the paradise they were about to enter. Teetering on the precipice between life and afterlife, those who caught a glimpse of heaven viewed such sights as suggestive of their final destination and thus confirmed their assurance. As an ecstatic Mary Thomas reported as she neared her end in 1745, "I am almost at the top of the ladder. Now I can see the towers before me, and a large company coming up behind me" (Arminian, 1782, V: 1, pp. 21–22). Many told of the indescribable beauty of the celestial city or the peacefulness of journeys along rivers and through meadows escorted by heavenly guides. Others reported encounters with Jesus or angels. More affecting still were the accounts of those visited by family members already passed away. For instance, Martha Cook told her audience that "her brother Dickey had been with her, who had died 6 years before". Overhearing her husband's whispered suggestion that she was delirious, she replied "I am not: I know what I said: my brother has visited me more than once. He is a happy spirit: he has comforted me, and told me that I shall soon be with him" (Arminian, 1791, XIV: 1, pp. 17–22). Such visitations not only eased anxieties about the state of the deceased family member's soul but, as Margarete Holubetz has remarked of parallels in later fiction, provided "sturdy material proofs of the salvation of a departing soul permitted to envisage the glory of Heaven" (Holubetz, 1986).

The emphasis that Methodist authors placed upon these visitations as a demonstration of the doctrine of universal redemption reflects the agenda of biographers to use the behaviour of their subjects for practical instruction. This was not merely an agenda internalized by authors eager to provide fitting testament to their deceased friends and relatives. Rather, these deathbed scenes include unmistakable affirmations of intent. Whether it was in the exhortations of the dying person or in the narration sometimes added by the author, these descriptions make recurrent references to their grand purpose: to educate, evidence, and inspire. Manifold were the accounts in which persons engaged in holy dying encouraged their witnesses and, by extension, their readers, to "Come, see a Christian triumphing over

death'' (Arminian, 1782, V: 3, pp. 128–136). Recording bystanders often remarked how their subject was ''a living and dying witness'' to the power of God (Arminian, 1790, XIII: 6, pp. 295–300). Even more explicit were the comments of those authors who chose to address their readers directly. Submitting a moving account of his wife, Sarah, Barnabas Brough explained that he did so ''For the comfort and encouragement of those who are struggling on heavenward'' (Arminian, 1780, III: 11, pp. 592–601). Internalizing the experience he hoped his description would have on his readers, another writer wrote how the death of Mrs Dawson of Dublin ''was a means of strengthening my Faith. I was enabled to believe that sin should not again find a place in my heart: and that my God would be with me also in the dark valley'' (Arminian, 1783, VI: 6, pp. 305–306). Finally, in the story of the death of a 10-year-old boy, the narrator describes an encounter which exposes the common agendas of biographers and their dying subjects. Being consumed by a ''hectic fever'', John Warwick was visited by an adult acquaintance, Mr Collins (Arminian, 1782, V: 9, pp. 468–471). Addressing his elder, Warwick said ''Sir, I shall not live to be a Preacher''. Referring to the many exhortations the boy had already performed, Collins replied, ''my dear, you are a Preacher now'' (Arminian, 1782, V: 9, pp. 468–471). While the full significance of Collins' remarks may have escaped both those present, it would not have evaded the anonymous author who submitted this narrative to Wesley, who would also have discerned a deeper meaning. Not only did John Warwick preach the power of universal redemption to his witnesses through his exhortations and his own dying example, but the publication and distribution of an account of his death to a national readership, as part of an extended ministry, took the little boy's message of repentance and faith farther than he could have ever imagined.

Conclusion

The deathbed scenes that appeared in the *Arminian* magazine under John Wesley's editorship provide a case study in genre formation and a lesson in the uses of new tools of mass communication. Between 1780, when Wesley selected the first deathbed scene for publication, and his death in 1791, 152 such scenes appeared, each chosen, edited, and increasingly written to highlight the Methodist doctrine of universal redemption. The domineering presence of this implicit proselytizing message meant that story elements became more and more standardized over time, while individualizing details, narrative deviations, and damaging contradictions were rarely included. This then, is the fulfillment of David Duff's definition of a genre as a ''recurring type or category text, as defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria in which a high degree of standardization is apparent'' (Duff, 2000). The presence of an authoritarian editor and a feedback loop–linking author to reader to dying patient to author to editor–compounded the process of genre formation and quickly established strict rules by which each new submission had to abide. In this formulation, each new narrative provided another iteration, creating through repetition an intense and compelling collective portrait of holy dying (Kawin, 1972). The closed circuit between editor, author, reader, and dying patient also allows us to speculate as to the effect that narrative repetition had on practice. As the bluntest weapon in the Methodist media arsenal, the *Arminian* magazine may nevertheless have genuinely shaped religious behavior in the moments before death. By using personal correspondence and real-life narratives, John Wesley was able to co-opt dying patients and their families as actors in timeless dramas retold each month for an audience of thousands.

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