

[Odle on Seeman, 'Speaking with the Dead in Early America'](#)

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Erik R. Seeman. *Speaking with the Dead in Early America*. Early American Studies. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 344 pp. \$24.95 (paper), [ISBN 978-0-8122-2518-1](#).



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“I never shun a grave-yard ... something human is there” (p. 222). As this anonymous writer acknowledged in 1820, the dead retain their humanity—and their relationships with the living. Erik Seeman’s *Speaking with the Dead in Early America* explores how the dead have remained “a part of the imaginative landscape” of American Protestantism, concluding that lay beliefs, largely driven by women, won out over the hesitancy of theologians to create a mainstream “cult of the dead” by the early nineteenth century (p. 9). In Seeman’s telling, this cult was animated by five key ideas: that “corpses deserved adoration, departed souls turned into angels, souls returned to earth as guardian angels, graveyards harbored spirits of the dead, and praying to the dead was a legitimate form of religious communion” (p. 191). In particular, he argues, a modern vision of heaven as a place where loved ones are reunited emerged earlier than most scholars have realized.

Focusing on Euro-Americans in New England, and then across the North more widely, Seeman’s book traces changes in funeral ceremonies, memorialization, beliefs in ghosts and angels, and the emergence of new denominations between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. By looking at elegies, gravestone epitaphs, imaginative literature, mourning embroidery, and more, this wide-ranging work traces “relationships between heaven and earth” via material, print, and manuscript culture (p. 9).

While the Reformation may have done away with concepts like purgatory or intercessory saints, Seeman argues that Protestants were unwilling to give up relationships with the deceased. The new theology may have insisted that ringing church bells on All Saints’ Day could not be heard by the souls in a nonexistent purgatory, or that apparitions could not be ghosts (they could only be angels or demons), but common belief continued to hold that ghosts were the returned dead. Even as seventeenth-century ministers insisted on upholding orthodoxy, they participated in correspondence networks investigating supernatural occurrences and utilized the experimental models of natural philosophy in efforts to prove the existence, and substance, of the soul.

From these transatlantic scientific exchanges, Seeman turns to the crafting and circulation of elegies in New England, particularly those imagining the dead as speaking from heaven. Lydia Minot’s elegy for example, published in broadside, imagined her addressing readers: “In leaving your dark World, I left all Night; / Ascended where, nor Sun, nor Moon, we crave” (p. 60). Women were both subjects and authors of elegies, and were disproportionately likely to speak in ghostly first person or directly

address dead loved ones. Phillis Wheatley is presented as the exemplar eighteenth-century creator of such works, with over half of her nineteen surviving elegies speaking to or with the dead. (Beyond Wheatley, the work does not explore whether African American churches and congregants perceived the “cult of the dead” in ways distinctive from, or similar to, white New Englanders.) Seeman describes elegies as “material prayers” read at gravesides, recopied later, and circulated to distant relatives. In similar fashion, he investigates “talking” gravestones across the region: those that urged the living to visit their graves, or reassured visitors of the possibility of heavenly reunion. Analyzing hundreds of grave markers across a span of 150 years, Seeman finds that talking stones surged in frequency after 1750 and were more common for women.

Women were widely thought to inculcate superstition in the young, with mothers and nurses blamed by skeptics for training children to believe in spirits. But popular print culture was also influential in spreading accounts of ghosts, near-death experiences, and visions of heaven and hell. The eighteenth century’s imaginative literature demonstrated a growing acceptance of “vociferous” public mourning, as well as interest in the “pleasurable melancholy” of the Gothic (p. 144). Even as young women were warned away from such subject matter, the popularity of works like *Friendship in Death* (a 1728 collection purporting to be letters from the dead to the living) demonstrated the topic’s staying power. Such findings revise long-standing notions of the eighteenth century as increasingly secular or skeptical; *Speaking with the Dead* finds that religion deployed the enlightened language of experience and evidence to attempt corroboration of supernatural stories.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of many new denominations—including Shakers, Mormons, and Swedenborgians—that, in Seeman’s telling, demonstrate how engagement with the dead shaped both mainstream and novel Protestantism. Shaker “spirit communications” in the form of messages from deceased loved ones brought spectators to their services, while Mormon emphasis on the “eternal family” created by vicarious baptism of the dead was a key element attracting converts. A modern vision of heaven, conceiving of it as a continuation of material existence and a reunification with human loved ones, took priority over older models highlighting the beatific vision and the soul’s merger with the divine. Emanuel Swedenborg’s visions even humanized angels, claiming that they were spirits of the dead who had been transformed by heavenly wisdom, not a separate type of being. Lay beliefs that the dead were “present tho’ invisible” permeated nineteenth-century thought (p. 230).

By the antebellum period a full-blown “cult of the dead” had emerged, Seeman argues. Postmortem portraits and photographs, mourning embroidery, hair work, and other items all functioned to keep memories—and even physical remains—close. Viewings of the corpse in the days between death and burial were increasingly common, with bodies described as “beautiful” and even “holy” by mourners (p. 204). Seeman suggests that interpretations of antebellum deathways as secular or driven by class performance have missed the religious, even numinous, power assigned to human remains and mourning mementos. While this work highlights continuity across time and Protestant denominations, I found myself curious about how people distinguished between their own beliefs and practices and those of others that they found laughable or outrageous. Curious spectators may have come to Shaker services in the hopes of hearing spirits but did not necessarily convert. Many outsiders regarded the tenets of early Mormonism, including vicarious baptism, as dangerously beyond the pale. Exploring where those boundaries were drawn, by whom, and why would have been intriguing.

Seeman has written a clear, compelling account of the permeable boundary between the living and the dead in early America, full of rich anecdote and accessible enough to be assigned in upper-level courses. Driven by women, who largely undertook the caretaking of the dead and the spiritual and emotional labor of mourning, Protestant Anglo-American culture upheld an intimacy with the dead, petitioning them for comfort, ventriloquizing them in poetry and epitaphs, and integrating their images and memory into family life. As *Speaking with the Dead* demonstrates, for those in mourning—which is all of us, eventually—the dead are never far away.

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