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'I haue written here a prayer': The Making of John Bradford's Mother's Prayer

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**‘I haue written here a prayer’:  
The Making of John Bradford’s Mother’s Prayer**

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Louise Horton

In 1582, Thomas Bentley’s *The Monument of Matrones* was printed as the ‘absolute and perfect book for the simpler sort of women’.<sup>1</sup> At over 1600 pages and containing the writings of Katherine Parr, Anne Askew, Elizabeth Tyrwhitt and Lady Jane Grey, the collection is now considered to be the first anthology of women’s writing in English.<sup>2</sup> In his role as the compiler of this ‘perfect book’, Bentley envisioned himself to be a diligent restorer of writing previously ‘obscured and worne cleane out of print’.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the *Monument* not only provides evidence of the early transmission of texts by prominent sixteenth-century female writers, but also offers the only known printed record of devotional writing by less known women. Yet, can Bentley’s assertion that he played ‘the part of a faithfull collector, by following my copies trulie’ be accepted without reservation?<sup>4</sup> This essay contests Bentley’s claim by exploring the history of one obscure prayer buried deep within the *Monument*. The exhumation of this text, by a writer simply referred to as ‘John Bradford’s mother’, enables us to not only reconstruct the lost face of its sixteenth-century writer but also to question how accurately Bentley copied other works he chose to include in his printed mausoleum to early modern women writers.

To understand whether Bentley did follow his copy of John Bradford’s mother’s prayer faithfully we should first establish how reliant our understanding of John Bradford’s mother’s

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bentley, *The Monument of Matrones* (London: H. Denham, 1582), sig. B1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> John N. King, ‘Thomas Bentley’s Monument of Matrones: The Earliest Anthology of English Women’s Texts’, in *Strong Voices, Weak History: Early Women Writers & Canons in England, France, & Italy*, ed. by Pamela Joseph Benson and Victoria Kirkham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 216-238 (p. 216).

<sup>3</sup> Bentley, sig. B1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. B3<sup>r</sup>.

gender, identity and writing is on the interventions of Bentley and subsequent editors of the prayer attributed to her. Little is known about Bradford's mother. The *Monument* provides the only extant version of her brief prayer but offers no illuminating detail either regarding her life or Bentley's source for her writing.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, so sparse is the biographical information surrounding Bradford's mother that Bentley even denies her a full name, defining her purely in relationship to her son — the Marian martyr executed in 1555. It is only four hundred years later, in Betty Travitsky's foundational anthology of Englishwomen's writing in the Renaissance, that Bradford's mother is granted the honorific 'Mistress', enabling a partial, but distinctly, female identity to emerge from Bentley's hybridised son and mother formulation.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, John Bradford's mother became Mistress Bradford, and an early modern woman was made flesh within a growing canon of recovered Renaissance writers. Yet this twentieth-century editorial decoupling of the two lives associated with the prayer has significant implications for how we understand the text because, almost paradoxically, the creation of a distinct identity for the woman writer leads us further away from the work that Bentley copied.

As Sarah C. E. Ross and Paul Salzman have argued, editing women's writing to emphasise the connection between life and works has problematic implications.<sup>7</sup> Their claim that associating 'women's writing with biographical exemplarity' prevents full engagement with the complex material reality of early modern writing is particularly germane to the reception history of John Bradford's mother's prayer.<sup>8</sup> The supposed exemplarity of Mistress Bradford's life as a pious mother of a martyred son is the defining interpretive principle applied to the prayer attributed to her.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the main evidence we have of Mistress Bradford's life and piety comes from that very same text. Thus using the life of Mistress Bradford to understand the prayer

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<sup>5</sup> Betty Travitsky, *The Paradise of Women: Writings by Englishwomen of the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah C. E. Ross and Paul Salzman, 'Introduction: Editing Early Modern Women', in *Editing Early Modern Women*, ed. by Sarah C. E. Ross and Paul Salzman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 1-20 (p. 3).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> Travitsky, p. 37; Michele Osherow, *Biblical Women's Voices in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 73.

attributed to her is both circular and reductive. In such invidious analysis there can be no new interpretation of the prayer without new insight into the life of its creator. Yet the prayer did not emerge from a hermetically sealed female existence. It is a product of the religio-political and socio-cultural environment that executed and subsequently revered John Bradford. As such it should be read in the context of those wider conditions of production in order to break the connection between the writer's gender and work.

Patricia Pender and Ros Smith's consideration of the material culture of early modern women's writing provides a relevant framework for splitting the woman from the word. Stating that 'our assessment of what constitutes a woman writer often remains tied to an identifiable female voice and a more or less original text considered in its first context of production', Pender and Smith suggest we should instead recognise concepts of 'gender and authorship to be dependent on complex material histories of production'.<sup>10</sup> This position is difficult to apply to Bradford's mother's prayer if we assume we are reading a more or less original text that would otherwise have been lost had Bentley not included it in the *Monument*. Yet, as Danielle Clarke has argued in relation to present-day anthologies of early modern women's writing, selecting texts 'under the aegis of recovery' can produce 'textually worrying results'.<sup>11</sup> For Clarke, anthologies problematically silence a text's complex material history if the extract is not contextualised in relation to its source, transmission history and any known variants. From this perspective, if a woman's writing is only accessible via an anthology any assumptions regarding authorial identity and intention must be treated with caution because the text is no longer in its original condition of production. Thus Clarke, Pender and Smith advocate reading early modern women's writing not as an isolated text in a singular publication event but rather as a text in dialogue, and at times contention, with its own complex production and transmission history.

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<sup>10</sup> Patricia Pender and Rosalind Smith, 'Introduction: Early Modern Women's Material Texts: Production, Transmission and Reception', in *Material Cultures of Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. by Patricia Pender and Rosalind Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1-13 (pp. 2-3).

<sup>11</sup> Danielle Clarke, 'Nostalgia, Anachronism, and the Editing of Early Modern Women's Texts', *Text*, 15 (2003), 187-209 (p. 192).

There may be no recognised transmission history for the Bradford prayer with which to contextualise the *Monument's* version, but we can place it in dialogue with how Bentley chose to present it. Indeed, exploring its deceptively complicated positioning and composition reveals a number of textual clues that suggest that the prayer's origins are not as straightforwardly biographical as assumed. Using this knowledge to read beyond the *Monument* and into other writing associated with Bradford's socio-cultural environment will ultimately lead us to question how gender and authorship is attributed to texts selected for Bentley's 'large if not great' tome.<sup>12</sup>

Bentley initially grants his reader a powerful but brief encounter with Mistress Bradford in the *Monument's* preface, placing her in the company of Katherine Parr, Anne Askew, Elizabeth Tyrwhitt, Lady Jane Dudley (née Grey) and Lady Abergavenny. Bradford's inclusion in this group suggests how Bentley wants his reader to view her. He may identify her only as 'maister Bradfords mother', but she is deliberately placed in proximity to a number of influential female writers. The implication of this positioning is that she too is a writer worthy of comparison with these more prominent women. However, it is not only Mistress Bradford's authorial skills that Bentley seeks to elevate in the preface. For Bentley the women writers have shown 'themselues woorthie paternes of all pietie, godlinesse, and religion to their sex' and as such provide the *Monument's* female readers with examples to imitate.<sup>13</sup> He includes Mistress Bradford in this roll call by prefiguring the biblical leitmotiv in the Bradford prayer and describing Mistress Bradford as possessing the 'holinesse, deuotion, feare of God, iustice, vprightnesse, &c. of Hanna'.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, this virtually unnamed woman acquires an exemplary life through the invocation of Hannah as a maternal 'paradigm of Protestant expression and belief' and, devoid of real detail, she becomes one of Bentley's 'woorthie paternes'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick Collinson, *Elizabethans* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Bentley, sig. B1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. B1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Osherow, p. 46; Bentley, sig. B1<sup>r</sup>.

The idea of Mistress Bradford as a pattern or template for women readers continues with Bentley's positioning of the 150 word prayer attributed to her under the sub-heading of 'certaine prayers made by godlie women martyrs'.<sup>16</sup> Following on from the prayers attributed to Anne Askew and the martyrs Eululia and Agnes, Mistress Bradford's prayer completes this section of the *Monument*. If we read these prayers in sequence, we can again see Mistress Bradford acquiring the attributes of those who precede her. Her words follow those of a Henrician woman martyr, the female martyr whose name means 'well spoken' in Greek, and finally the patron saint of chastity and girls. The mother of the Marian martyr is next in Bentley's sequence and provides his readers with a further example of an articulate female role model. Thus the power of the Bradford prayer, as printed in the *Monument*, lies in the combined zeal of these religious female voices. Yet it is worth recognising that the words of the other three women in this sequence are not entirely what Bentley suggests they are, and have instead been extracted and re-worked from John Foxe's *Act and Monuments*.<sup>17</sup> The positioning of the Bradford prayer in such close proximity to these three other distorted texts suggests that caution has to be applied when reading this fourth prayer Bentley attributes to a woman martyr.

Further doubts arise about the exact nature of the Bradford prayer when considering the extent to which its composition is reliant on formulaic constructions of female devotion. Underpinned by the 'traditional hagiographical strength-in-weakness paradigm' present in many accounts of the words of women martyrs, the prayer weaves together the sacrifice of a living mother, the remembrance of her martyred son and the biblical story of Hannah and Samuel.<sup>18</sup> Beginning by establishing the speaker's familial connection to the martyred Bradford, the short prayer concludes by the speaker offering her son, as 'Hanna did' to God:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 213-214; John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London: John Day, 1576), p. 1234, p. 118, p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> Megan L. Hickerson, *Making Women Martyrs in Tudor England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 7.

Ah good Father, which dooest vouchsafe that my sonne Iohn Bradford, being a greuous sinner in thy sight, should find this fauour with thee, to be one of thy sonne Christ his captaines and men of war, to fight and suffer for his Gospels sake, I thanke thee: and praie thee in the same thy deere sonne Christs name, that thou wouldest forgiue him his sinnes and vnthankfulnesse; and make perfect in him that good which thou hast begun in him. Yea Lord, I praie thee make him worthie to suffer, not only imprisonment, but euen verie death for thy truth, religion, and Gospell sake. As Hanna did applie, dedicate, and giue hir first child and sonne Samuel vnto thee: euen so doo I deere Father; beseeching thee, for Christs sake, to accept this my gift; and giue my sonne Iohn Bradford grace alwaies trulie to serue thee, and thy people, as Samuel did;

Amen, Amen.<sup>19</sup>

It is a powerful prayer that invests its speaker with pathos and a quiet dignity, but if we recognise that it consists of typographical and hagiographical tropes, and read it in the context of Bentley's desire for patterns for the 'simpler sort of women' then the prayer appears less personal and more universal. John Bradford's mother's prayer is a far more complex text than has previously been assumed.<sup>20</sup>

Bentley, however, does not directly attribute authorship of the text to Mistress Bradford. Instead the prayer is entitled 'The praier that maister Bradfords mother said and offered vnto God in his behalfe, a little before his martyrdome'.<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Summit has argued that Bentley conflated 'the history of women's writing with the history of women's prayer', and in the Bradford example it is possible to see how in the *Monument* there is little distinction between a woman who speaks and a woman who writes.<sup>22</sup> Yet, Bentley only states that the prayer was 'said' and 'offered' by Bradford's mother. There is no suggestion that she also wrote it. The assumption of authorship has been made by subsequent readers and

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<sup>19</sup> Bentley, p. 215.

<sup>20</sup> For brief recognition of Mistress Bradford as an early modern woman writer, see Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 74; Micheline White, 'A Biographical Sketch of Dorcas Martin: Elizabethan Translator, Stationer, and Godly Matron', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 30.3 (1999), 775-792 (p. 776).

<sup>21</sup> Bentley, p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380-1589* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 159.

scholars, deftly illustrating Danielle Clarke's concerns regarding ahistorical interpretations of writing taken from anthologies. Consequently, rather than straightforwardly accepting Mistress Bradford to be its singular author we should understand the prayer to be an obliquely attributed, and complexly composed, text completing a sequence of prayers whose origins have been obscured by Bentley. This realisation invites us to consider whether the Bradford prayer too can find its origins in a printed martyrology.

In 1564, *Certain Most Godly, fruitful and comfortable letters of such true saintes and holy martyrs of God*, was printed.<sup>23</sup> This collection of martyrs' correspondence contained 53 letters attributed to John Bradford and includes one entitled 'A letter written to hys Mother, as a farewell, when he thought he should have suffered shortly after.'<sup>24</sup> This letter, at almost 1300 words, begins with Bradford's greetings and blessing to his 'good and deare Mother', before acknowledging that she was daily, if not hourly, praying to God to bless Bradford.<sup>25</sup> He then states that his purpose in writing is because 'I thynke it good to write something whereby thys your crying might bee furthered'.<sup>26</sup> The focus of the letter appears to be Bradford's desire to direct his mother's devotions. He continues: 'if I could get you to bee merye with me, [...] and to praye on thys sorte', before proceeding with a passage remarkably similar to the prayer Bentley would print in 1582:

Ah good father whiche doest vouchsafe that my sonne being a greuous synner in thy fyghte, shoulde fynde thys faouere with thee, to be one of thy Sonnes captaynes, and men of warre to fyghte and suffer for hys Gospelles sake. I thanke thee and praye thee in Christes name that thou wouldest forgeue hym hys synnes and vnthankfulnesse, and make perfecte in hym that good whiche thou haste begonne: yea Lorde I praye thee make hym worthye to suffer not onely imprisonmente, but euen veye death for thy truth, religion and Gospells sake. As Anna dyd applye and geue her fyrste childe Samuell vnto thee: so doe

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<sup>23</sup> Miles Coverdale [Henry Bull], *Certain most godly, fruitful, and comfortable letters of such true saintes and holy martyrs of God, as in the late bloodye persecution here within this realme, gaue their lyues for the defence of Christes holy gospel written in the tyme of their affliction and cruell imprisonment* (London: John Day, 1564).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 451-454.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451.



I deare father, besechyng thee for Christes sake to accepte thys my gifte, and geue my sonne Iohn Bradford grace alwayes trulye to serue thee and thy people as Samuell did, Amen, Amen.<sup>27</sup>

Comparing this extract from Bradford's letter with the prayer in the *Monument* directly contests any notion of Mistress Bradford as an autonomous woman writer. The printed letter does not offer us a variant text but instead reveals Bentley's real source for the prayer. For, in addition to thinking 'it good to write something' for his mother to say, Bradford also unequivocally claims authorship of the prayer twice more in the letter, writing 'Good Mother therefore marke what I haue written, and learne this prayer by hart' and 'I haue written here a prayer for you to learne to praye for me good Mother'.<sup>28</sup> There can be no doubt. The prayer is the work of the son and not the mother.

Moreover, reading the supposed prayer in the context of the 1564 printed collection of martyrs' letters illustrates that the potential for hermeneutic distortion is no less prevalent in early modern anthologies than it is in their present-day equivalents. The recognition that Bentley's source was a printed copy of a letter means that we cannot even unquestionably accept that the original recipient was Bradford's biological mother. The printed letters address Bradford's co-religionists in familial terms, apparently following Matthew 12: 48-50:

Who is my mother? & who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hande ouer his disciples, & sayde: Beholde my mother and my brethren. For who soeuer doth ye wyll of my father which is in heauen, the same is my brother, sister and mother.<sup>29</sup>

In Bradford's letters men are 'brothers in y<sup>e</sup> lorde' and 'my father' whilst, far more problematically, women are 'my good mother' and 'deare sister'.<sup>30</sup> Thus there is no certainty that Bentley's source

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 452-453.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 453, p. 454.

<sup>29</sup> Miles Coverdale, *Biblia the Byble, that is, the holy Scripture of the Olde and New Testament, faithfully translated in to Englyshe* (Southwark?: J. Nycolson, 1535), sig. BB1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 295, p. 305, p. 314, p. 290, p. 413, p. 342, p. 306, p. 374, p. 377.

was even a letter to Bradford's actual mother. Instead he was working from a printed martyrology that informed him Bradford's text was a 'letter to hys mother'. From these paratextual interventions of the 1564 martyrologist, Henry Bull, and Bradford's own words, Bentley forged an identity for a female prayer writer which has been perpetuated ever since.

However, identifying the 1564 printed edition of John Bradford's letter as Bentley's source for the prayer has more problematic ramifications than for just Mistress Bradford's position within the canon of early modern women writers. It requires us to re-think whether we can continue to accept, without qualification, Bentley as a 'careful antiquarian' who placed his texts as he found them.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, recent individual research suggests that Bentley's treatment of the Bradford prayer is far from the only instance of this re-gendered manipulation of texts within the *Monument*. Kate Narveson identifies a similar instance where the supposed prayer of a woman is in reality an extract from prayers translated by Thomas Rogers.<sup>32</sup> John N. King suggests that one of the prayers attributed to Elizabeth I is in reality an extract from Richard Mulcaster's *The Queen's Majesty's Passage through the City of London to Westminster the Day Before her Coronation*, whilst another of the queen's prayers has been formed from a third person account of her imprisonment in the Tower printed within John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, these collective examples suggest that there may be a pattern to Bentley's anthological practices which requires us to re-examine the material 'forces through which articulations of gender – and authorship itself – are produced and reproduced' within the *Monument*.<sup>34</sup>

Bentley may claim to have been a true collector of women's writing but his preface is far more transparent about his methodology than has previously been assumed. Re-read in

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<sup>31</sup> Susan M. Felch, 'The Backward Gaze: Editing Elizabeth Trywhit's Prayerbook', in *Editing Early Modern Women*, ed. by Sarah C. E. Ross and Paul Salzman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 21-39 (p. 32).

<sup>32</sup> Kate Narveson, 'Traces of Reading Practice in Thomas Bentley's *Monument of Matrons*', *ANQ*, 20.12 (2008), 11-18 <<https://doi.org/10.3200/ANQQ.21.2.11-18>> [accessed 9 January 2017] (p. 16).

<sup>33</sup> King, p. 228.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah C. E. Ross, 'Early Modern Women and the Apparatus of Authorship', *Paragon*, 29.2 (2012), 1-8 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2012.0119>> [accessed 9 January 2017] (p. 2).

the knowledge of how he shaped the prayers of Bradford, Elizabeth I, Askew, Eulalia and Agnes, the preface openly belies the notion of Bentley as a 'non-intrusive' editor of writing by women.<sup>35</sup> In order to create his vast 'domestical library' for women, Bentley clearly states 'I indeuoured for their sakes, by all possible diligence, to cull and bring out of the rich store and treasure of the approoued works of manie learned men'.<sup>36</sup> The acknowledgement that Bentley's sources were works partly by men is understood by John N. King as the compiler's attempt to form a canon of women's writing supplemented with 'devotional texts constructed by men who wrote for a female audience.'<sup>37</sup> Yet, whilst Bentley was undoubtedly using writing by men within the *Monument*, he was not just using texts they had written for a female readership. Miles Coverdale and Henry Bull's *Certain Most Godly Letters*, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, and Richard Mulcaster's account of Elizabeth's royal entry are not works targeted specifically at women. Instead Bentley extracted from these works accounts of women speaking and disingenuously repackaged the words to imply, but not explicitly state, female authorship. Consequently, the first anthology of women's writing contains numerous concealed examples of men's writing complexly re-gendered by Bentley.

Moreover, comparing known variants of works by more well-known women within the *Monument* suggests that Bentley intervened 'to reduce these their manifold works into one entire volume'.<sup>38</sup> Lady Jane Grey's execution speech is heavily abridged in the *Monument* reducing it to a tenth of the size of Foxe's version of the same event.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Anne Askew's prayer consists of only the final quarter of 'The confession of the faith which Anne Askew made in Newgate before she suffered' which Foxe includes in *Acts and Monuments*. The Grey and Askew examples appear to illustrate Bentley's intention to

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<sup>35</sup> Felch, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Bentley, sigs. B1<sup>r</sup>-B1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> King, p. 216.

<sup>38</sup> Bentley, sig. B3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Edith Snook, 'Jane Grey, 'Manful' Combat, and the Female Reader in Early Modern England', *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 32.1 (2009), 47-81 (p. 63).

provide but 'a tast' of godly writing by labouring 'as you see (good reader) like a poore gleaner.'<sup>40</sup> Yet these two works are also heavily mediated texts with complex transmission histories and Bentley's gleaning appears to be neither from manuscripts nor from the original printed publications of the Grey and Askew texts. Thus to read either Grey or Askew in the *Monument* is to read writing that has been shaped and re-shaped by at least Foxe and Bentley. Once again we find evidence that texts have been manipulated by Bentley, perhaps in order that women could 'readilie find without tediousnesse, or distraction' devotional tracts.<sup>41</sup> All of which suggests we should understand the *Monument* to be a collection of writing not necessarily *by* women, but rather to be a record of works that Bentley considered suitable *for* women.

The reconstruction of the lost material history of the Bradford prayer, and similar texts within the *Monument*, explicates Helen Smith's assertion that early modern book creation was collective and more 'complexly sexed than has been allowed'.<sup>42</sup> Yet it also exposes the extent to which our understanding of gender and authorship in the *Monument* is contingent upon the reading and anthological practices of Thomas Bentley. We have imagined Mistress Bradford to be an early modern woman writer because Bentley recognised the power of the pious mother figure receiving Bradford's religious instruction in Bull's martyrology, and from such a textual rib fashioned a new life. Thus staring into the *Monument's* 'christall Mirrour for Matrones' to find the true identity of this sixteenth-century writer returns not only the reflections of Bradford, Bull and Bentley, collectively making a martyr's mother's prayer, but also leaves us looking for glimpses of Bentley reaching out for other books not to copy 'trulie'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bentley, sig. B3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. B1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> Helen Smith, *Grossly Material Things': Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Bentley, sig. B1<sup>v</sup>, B3<sup>r</sup>.

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