

Introduction

The Other Voice

The story of Hester Pulter (ca. 1605–1678) and her manuscript reads like a fictional episode, one in which a long-lost literary treasure is rediscovered in a dusty attic or archive. The manuscript was compiled around 1660 and draws together a body of poetry and prose composed throughout the 1640s and 1650s, but it remained in obscurity for over three hundred years, only re-emerging during the mid-1990s. We are now only just beginning to understand how such a large body of writing, comprising one hundred and thirty poems and a prose romance, could lie forgotten for so long. One reason for this neglect is that unlike a handful of contemporary women, such as Katherine Philips, who circulated her poetry primarily in manuscript, or Margaret Cavendish, who published her works in print, Pulter did not establish a reputation as a writer during her own lifetime.¹ In one poem she claims to have been “shut up in a country grange,” living and writing in isolation, where she was “confined / Against the noble freedom of [her] mind.”² While we have little indication of how real this confinement was, how long it lasted, or how much of her work was composed during that time, there is no evidence that Pulter’s contemporaries thought of her as a writer or that her work was read by anyone outside of her family home.

Pulter’s relative isolation shaped her responses to contemporary intellectual and literary culture in ways that make her writing particularly interesting for modern readers. In the last several decades scholarship of early modern women’s writing has demonstrated that

1. For manuscript circulation as an important mode of publication, see Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), and Arthur F. Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). For the significance of manuscript circulation for women writers, see Margaret J. M. Ezell, *The Patriarch’s Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), especially 101–26.

2. “Why must I thus forever be confined,” lines 1–2.

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the majority of women, even those writing in manuscript, were writing with some form of public readership in mind. Within this context, Pulter's volume proves to be something of an anomaly. Writing in apparent isolation and therefore liberated from the need to conform to the expectations and tastes of a widespread audience, she expresses opinions and emotions not usually encountered in poetry by early modern women, or indeed men. As the quotations above make clear, Pulter is unusually forthright about the circumstances of her own life and about her own suffering. Several of her poems were apparently composed during pregnancy and when she was recovering from childbirth, and she provides moving insights into the physical and emotional suffering these conditions entailed.³ Others explore the trauma occasioned by the deaths of her teenaged children as she refuses to conform to the literary and religious conventions governing the moderation of maternal grief.⁴ Meditations on the deaths of her children lead her to consider her own mortality and the effect old age is having on her body.⁵ All of these factors seem to have contributed to a general state of melancholy, explored throughout the collection as Pulter apparently used the composition process as a means of countering her own negative thoughts.⁶ The apparently personal content of the poetry is unusual and runs counter to modern critical assertions about the highly performative and public nature of seventeenth-

3. See, for example, "Universal Dissolution, Made When I Was with Child of My 15th Child, [My Son John], I Being, [as Eve]ryone Thought, in a Consumption, 1648" and "This Was Written 1648 When I Lay In With My Son John [Pulter], Being My 15th Child, I Being So Weak That in Ten Days and Nights I Never Moved My Head One Jot from My Pillow, Out of Which Great Weakness My Gracious God Restored Me That I Still Live to Magnify His Mercy, 1655."

4. See "Upon the Death of My Dear and Lovely Daughter J.[ane] P.[ulter]" and "On the Same [1]." For the conventions governing the expression of maternal grief, see Elizabeth Clarke, "A Heart Terrifying Sorrow": The Deaths of Children in Seventeenth-Century Women's Manuscript Journals," in *Representations of Childhood Death*, ed. Gillian Avery and Kimberly Reynolds (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), 65–87.

5. See "Made When I Was Not Well."

6. For melancholy in Pulter's poetry, see Alice Eardley, "Saturn (whose aspects soe sads my soule): Lady Hester Pulter's Feminine Melancholic Genius," in *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts, IV: Papers of the Renaissance English Text Society, 2002–2006*, ed. Michael Denbo (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2009): 239–54.

century verse.⁷ While emotional matters are by no means absent from the writing of her contemporaries, Pulter's poetry has a confessional quality more readily associated with later periods. As a result, we gain a strong sense of an individual persona from which these thoughts and feelings originate.

The forthright tone of Pulter's writing extends beyond her reflections on personal matters to her observations about the social and political events taking place around her. A royalist writing during the English Civil War of the 1640s and Cromwellian Protectorate of the 1650s, she was initially on the losing side of a series of conflicts between King Charles I and Parliament that had a devastating impact on the nation as a whole. Pulter responds to these events with palpable anger, in one poem characterizing Oliver Cromwell as an ibis, a large bird resembling a stork, that has defecated over the English nation, polluting it with its "putrid filth."⁸ Such a characterization is usually associated with the cheap and scurrilous political pamphlets of the period, not with poetry and certainly not with that produced by women. Pulter does not, however, reserve her ire for the monarch's opposition and is instead particularly critical of the ruling classes in general for their failure to defend both their king and the social hierarchy over which he presided.⁹ It is clear that Pulter holds men primarily responsible for the nation's political disintegration and for the widespread social and moral collapse with which that disintegration is associated. This proto-feminist tone is carried over into *The Unfortunate Florinda*, her prose romance, which explores the balance and abuse of power in relationships between the sexes. Again, Pulter is unusual in her expression of a worldview primarily colored by her awareness of her own gender and in her sustained and far-reaching analysis of the social and political consequences of early modern gender relations.

7. For the public nature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetical culture, see David Norbrook and H. R. Woudhuysen, eds., *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse* (London: Penguin, 2005), 39–41. Explorations of the relationship between "public" and "private" in seventeenth-century poetry are provided in Derek Hirst and Richard Strier, eds., *Writing and Political Engagement in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially 1–9.

8. "The Caucasines with locusts were annoyed," line 12.

9. See, for example, "The elephant, when radiant Sol doth rise," lines 24–31.

None of this is meant to suggest, however, that we should read Pulter's writing as though it offers unmediated access to her thoughts and feelings. Her writing, which includes both poetry and prose, reveals her to have been particularly attuned to the common themes and formal conventions of a range of literary traditions. In her poetry, rather than confining herself to a particular mode of writing, Pulter engages with a broad range of seventeenth-century styles. These include the topographical pastoral poetry of Michael Drayton, the plain-style devotional verse of George Herbert, and the satirical and topical compositions produced by the circle around William Davenant.¹⁰ Her poetry includes a series of emblem poems that are the first known collection of original emblems produced by an Englishwoman. Similarly, *The Unfortunate Florinda* is only the third original romance produced by a woman in England, after Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621) and Anna Weamys's *A Continuation of Sir Philip Sydney's Arcadia* (1651), and it is one of the first to engage with the French romance tradition, specifically the works of Madeleine de Scudéry that were becoming popular in England at the time she was writing.¹¹ The forms and genres Pulter adopts provide frameworks through which she makes sense of and communicates a range of ideas and emotions. We might conclude that while she may not have had an *actual* readership in mind, she did have an *imaginary* audience for whom she crafted her thoughts and feelings into literary works they would appreciate and understand. The topics and issues she explores and the ways she chooses to write about them are therefore colored by literary conventions and by the interests and preoccupations of the society around her. Pulter is distinctive, however, because she consistently innovates, pushing the boundaries of conventions in ways that make them sound fresh and personal. It is this experimentation that marks Pulter as an "other voice." Her

10. For examples of these styles, see "The Invitation into the Country, to My D.[ear] D.[aughters] M.[argaret] P.[ulter], P.[enelope] P.[ulter], 1647, When His Sacred Majesty Was at Unhappy [Holmby]"; "My Soul's Sole Desire," and "To Sir William D.[avenant] upon the Unspeakable Loss of the Most Conspicuous and Chief Ornament of His Frontispiece."

11. For French romances and their reception in England, see Thomas P. Haviland, *The Roman de Longue Haleine on English Soil* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931); Alex Davis, *Chivalry and Romance in the English Renaissance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 169–201; and Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction, 1558–1700: A Critical History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 177–90.

writing provides a glimpse of some of the thoughts, concerns, and literary interests of an early modern woman freed from the demands of an immediate public readership.¹²

Pulter's World

THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

Pulter's poetry and prose was composed during, and largely in response to, one of the most dramatic periods of British history.¹³ On August 2, 1642, King Charles I raised the royal standard at Nottingham Castle, beginning a series of civil wars between the monarchy and Parliament that would not come to an end until 1651. In very broad terms, the conflict took place between those who became known as "royalists," supporters of Charles I, who sought to defend the established church and state, and those referred to as "parliamentarians," who sought to defend the rights of Parliament against what they perceived to be excessive monarchical control and who often favored religious reform. In reality, these were very loosely affiliated groups within which different factions emerged at various points during the conflict, and individuals often had their own particular motivations for supporting either side.¹⁴ In general, it seems that the vast majority

12. Margaret Ezell discusses Pulter's engagement with contemporary literary culture and raises questions about her status with regard to other early modern women and their writing in "The Laughing Tortoise: Speculations on Manuscript Sources and Women's Book History," *English Literary Renaissance* 38, no. 2 (2008): 331–55.

13. Strictly speaking, the "United Kingdom of Great Britain" did not exist until the official union of the kingdoms of England and Scotland in 1707. During the Civil War, the nation was still divided into the three kingdoms of England (which included Wales), Ireland, and Scotland. Throughout this edition "Britain" and "British" are used in reference to England, Wales, and Scotland, in part because Pulter uses the terms in this way. She probably adopted them in response to the efforts of James I to unite the kingdoms of Scotland and England (together with Wales) into a single kingdom called "Great Britain." A detailed but concise account of the English Civil War can be found in David L. Smith, *A History of the Modern British Isles, 1603–1707* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 77–161.

14. In recent years historians have begun exploring the many different types of royalism in evidence during the Civil War and its aftermath. See, for example, Timothy Taylor, *Cavaliers, Clubs, and Literary Culture* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994); Jason McElligott and David L. Smith, eds., *Royalists and Royalism During the English Civil Wars*

of people simply wanted to see an end to a conflict causing considerable distress and suffering throughout the country.¹⁵

The royalism Pulter expresses in her poetry was apparently motivated by a strong investment in a social hierarchy she perceived to be under threat and by a sense that that hierarchy was the best guarantee of peace and stability. Her own father had been a member of James I's privy council and was eventually made an earl, the third highest rank of the aristocracy, after duke and marquis. She therefore had a direct connection with the Stuart monarchy (James I was the father of Charles I) and, as the daughter of a prominent aristocrat, was firmly established within the social hierarchy over which the king presided. While in reality members of all social classes fought on the side of Parliament, many royalists, including Pulter, characterized the monarch's opponents as over-ambitious members of the lower orders.¹⁶ She suggests that the ambition of these individuals disrupted the peace and prosperity she associated with Stuart rule. For Pulter, the wars were a consequence of a disintegration of the social hierarchy, which they also helped to sustain, and this breakdown of order meant the nation was plunged into anarchical chaos.

The effects of the Civil War were felt throughout England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Even for those not directly involved in the dispute it was impossible to escape the devastating effects. Between 1642 and 1648 nearly 4 percent of the English population died as a result of conflict or disease, and survivors found their homes

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially 1–5; and Jason McElligott and David L. Smith, eds., *Royalists and Royalism During the Interregnum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), especially 1–15. For these differences in relation to royalist literature, see Robert Wilcher, *The Writing of Royalism, 1628–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–3.

15. Smith, *History*, 149.

16. For Pulter's comments on the low social status of the king's opposition, see "The elephant, when radiant Sol doth rise," lines 30–31 and "When royal Fergus' line did rule this realm," lines 31–32. For this tendency among royalists, see Laura Lunger Knoppers, "'Sing Old Noll the Brewer': Royalist Satire and Social Inversion," *The Seventeenth Century* 15, no. 1 (2000): 32–52. For the relationship between political propaganda and social reality, see John Walter, "The Impact on Society: A World Turned Upside Down," in *The Impact of the English Civil War*, ed. John Morrill (London: Collins and Brown, 1991), 104–22.

and towns invaded by the troops traversing the country.¹⁷ The county of Hertfordshire where Pulter was living did not escape the worst effects of war; large bands of often poorly disciplined soldiers frequently crossed the county as they headed north, skirmishes were frequent, entire towns were set on fire, and numerous houses were plundered.¹⁸ Early in the conflict, local royalists attempted to engage in military action but were quashed by those aligning themselves with Parliament, who came to dominate Hertfordshire and the counties of East Anglia.¹⁹ The alliance of these counties in support of Parliament proved one of the strongest associations of the war, meaning Pulter was living in an area dominated by those antithetical to her political views.²⁰ She did not suffer the fate of many of her fellow royalists and Hertfordshire residents, however, many of whom had their estates confiscated and huge fines levied upon them.²¹

By 1648 it was clear that Parliament was winning the conflict, and attempts were made to negotiate a settlement with the king who, at that point, was being kept under house arrest on the Isle of Wight. The negotiations were unsuccessful, and in January 1649 Charles was brought to trial and then publicly executed on a stage erected in front of the Banqueting House at Whitehall Palace in London. For many, in a country that for the most part still considered monarchy to be the natural form of government, his death represented a fundamental disruption of the natural order. Pulter conveys this feeling in an elegy drawing on the common analogy made between the monarch and sun. Extending the simile beyond superficial comparisons, she imagines what would happen to the world should the literal source of all light and life disappear from the skies and concludes that the death of the monarch has resulted in the same degree of darkness

17. Charles Carlton, "The Impact of the Fighting," in *The Impact of the English Civil War*, ed. John Morrill (London: Collins and Brown, 1991), 20.

18. See Alfred Kingston, *Hertfordshire During the Great Civil War and the Long Parliament* (London: Elliot Stock, 1894).

19. Alan Thomson, ed., *The Impact of the First Civil War on Hertfordshire, 1642–1647* (Hertford, UK: Hertfordshire Record Society, 2007), xxiii–xxv.

20. Clive Holmes, *The Eastern Association in the English Civil War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

21. Thomson, *Impact*, lxix–lxxix.

and chaos.²² In the years following Charles's execution the country was officially a republic, but this was short-lived, and in 1653 Oliver Cromwell assumed the position of Lord Protector, making him head of state of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Throughout her poetry, Pulter presents Cromwell as a usurper and a tyrant. In the absence of a natural and cooperative social hierarchy governed by the king, he controls the unruly masses using violent force.²³ After his death in 1658, Cromwell's son Richard briefly took over as Protector, but he was quickly ousted by the Restoration of Charles II, son of Charles I, in 1660.

RELIGION

At the heart of the English Civil War was a dispute over religion. Many of those most active in the parliamentary cause were Calvinists, followers of the teachings of the French theologian John Calvin, and they sought the reformation of the theology and ceremonies of the English Church. On the other side of the political equation, supporters of Charles I were often staunch defenders of the established church. During the 1630s, the king together with William Laud, who was appointed archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, set about imposing changes to the church that their opponents often viewed as being dangerously Catholic. Great emphasis was placed on the sacraments, on the beauty of the church, and on the status of the clergy. To many, gripped by a prevailing and often hysterical fear of Popery, these reforms were a sign that a Catholic Counter-Reformation was gaining ground with the assistance of the king. Adding to these concerns, the changes being made within the church were often linked to an increasing interest in Arminianism, a strand of theology associated with the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius, that emphasized the role of the individual's free will in the acceptance of God's grace, a position viewed as being much closer to Catholic theology than to that of the Protestant reformers. In her poetry, Pulter condemns those responsible for desecrating churches during the conflict, suggesting a particular dislike of the more radical Calvinist groups, branded "puritans" by their detractors.

22. "On That Unparalleled Prince Charles the First, His Horrid Murder."

23. See, for example, "This huge leviathan, for all his strength," lines 21–26.

tors, who endorsed a more ascetic mode of living and worship. She also rails against her inability to participate in traditional church ceremonies, a circumstance that can possibly be attributed to the changes being made to church services during the 1640s.²⁴ Pulter's writing therefore provides some indication that she was broadly aligned with the views promoted by Charles I and by Laud.

The Laudian emphasis both on the role of beauty within the church and on the significance of clergy as intermediaries between the faithful and God, together with the notion of free will, were rejected by Calvinists. Instead they believed in Predestination, the idea that God extends his grace to a predetermined group of the Elect who have no agency with which to accept or reject that grace. Pulter is highly critical of two of the main Calvinist groups that came to prominence in Parliament during this period. On the one hand she attacks the Presbyterians, who wanted a Calvinist church of England governed by an elected lay clergy, and on the other she is damning of the Independent party who sought the complete separation of church and state, together with religious freedom for nonconformists.²⁵ Pulter has little to say about the theological positions of these groups and is apparently more interested in the political consequences of their beliefs. Throughout her poetry she continues to endorse the established form of church government, which placed the monarch at its head, while criticizing those who sought to undermine that particular form of social, religious and political hierarchy.²⁶ By the end of the 1640s, the Presbyterians were keen to establish a settlement with the king, while the Independents, who eventually prevailed, were ultimately responsible for the execution, or regicide, of Charles I. The Civil War, therefore, was not simply a conflict about the civic government of the nation, but was a battle for the souls of its population. For both sides

24. See Emblem 28, line 33 and Emblem 36, lines 22–23. For Pulter's sense of exclusion from the church, see "Must I thus ever interdicted be" and Elizabeth Clarke, "Women in Church and in Devotional Spaces," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 114–15.

25. For Pulter's attack on Presbyterians and Independents, see Emblem 52.

26. For references to Charles I as head of the English church, see "On Those Two Unparalleled Friends, Sir G.[eorge] Lisle and Sir C.[harles] Lucas," line 79, and "On the Same [2]," lines 38–40.

of the conflict, success in battle was often regarded as a sign of God's support for their cause.

SCIENCE

During the period that saw England in the grip of political, social, and religious upheaval, radical changes were also underway within various fields of intellectual inquiry that we would now categorize under the general heading of "science." Between the late-fifteenth and early-eighteenth centuries there was a gradual shift in thinking about the world that moved away from the received wisdom inherited from classical writers such as Aristotle and toward a greater emphasis on direct observation and experimentation. In England during the 1640s and 1650s, groups for research and discussion began to form in places including Oxford, Cambridge, and London. These groups included figures such as Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke who would come to prominence after the Restoration and who continue to be regarded as vitally important figures in the history of science. These groups laid the foundation for the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge, generally known as the Royal Society, which was established in 1660 and is still in existence today. While there is much debate concerning the role the Civil War and Interregnum played in fostering new scientific inquiry, the freeing up of the press that occurred during those decades helped to stimulate intellectual inquiry and to disseminate information and ideas beyond traditional intellectual circles.²⁷ Apparently lacking in any direct links to the scientific community, Pulter may have gained access to newly emerging ideas through the popularizing efforts of writers such as John Wilkins, who held a prominent place in the scientific circle that developed at Wadham College, Oxford.²⁸

27. Michael Hunter, *Science and Society in Restoration England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 25.

28. Pulter may also have had some contact with the contemporary scientific community via her sister-in-law, Margaret, later countess dowager of Marlborough, who acted as executor for the will of Royal Society member Sir Paul Neile (*ODNB*). For general discussions of the ways early modern Englishwomen engaged with contemporary scientific developments, see, for example, Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern*

Pulter apparently took a keen interest in several areas of “natural philosophy,” including the study of the stars and planets. Her poetry reveals considerable knowledge of relatively recent ideas and discoveries within astronomy, which she explores alongside long-standing astrological theories. During the middle decades of the sixteenth century, astronomers such as Nicolaus Copernicus began formulating heliocentric models of the solar system, in which the planets orbit the sun, which they set in opposition to the established geocentric models, in which the planets and the sun all orbit the earth. During the early years of the seventeenth century, Galileo lent considerable weight to these models through direct observation of the stars and planets, which he achieved through the use of a telescope. Pulter draws on many of the observations made by Galileo in his *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610), which she may have encountered in the *Philosophical Poems* of the Cambridge Platonist Henry More.²⁹ At the same time, Pulter, like Galileo and many of her contemporaries, does not reject ancient astrological models but instead presents them alongside recent astronomical discoveries. According to astrological theory, the stars and the planets exercise considerable influence both over events on earth and over the characters, lives, and physical health of individual people. Their positions in the sky at given moments can therefore be used to make predictions about the outcome of a specific set of events, the course of a person’s life, or the outcome of a particular illness. In England during the 1640s and 1650s, popular astrology flourished with publications such as William Lilly’s *Anglicus* (1646), which made predictions about the general outcome of the Civil War and also about the fates of high-profile individuals involved in it.³⁰

Science (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), and Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton, eds., *Women, Science, and Medicine: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society, 1500–1700* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1997).

29. For Pulter, Galileo, and More, see Sarah Hutton, “Hester Pulter (c. 1596–1678). A Woman Poet and the New Astronomy,” *Etudes Epistémè* 14 (2008): 77–87.

30. The full title of Lilly’s text is *Anglicus; Or, An Ephemeris for 1646. Delivering Mathematically the Success of this Year’s Actions Between the King and Parliament of England with Astrological Aphorisms Expedient for Physicians and Others, Useful for Students in this Science. To which is Added the Nativity of Prince Rupert* (London: T. B. for John Partridge and Humfry Blunden, 1646). For astrology in early modern England, see Bernard Capp, *English Almanacs, 1500–1800: Astrology and the Popular Press* (London: Faber and Faber,

A similar preoccupation with the more esoteric side of scientific exploration can be seen in Pulter's interest in alchemy, which continued to be an important part of the repertoire of high-profile early scientists such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton.³¹ During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a key alchemical pursuit was the attempt to turn base metals into gold, but the discipline included investigations into other areas, such as the development of medicines. The final aim of alchemy was to discover the secret of producing the Philosopher's Stone (or Elixir), the key to all alchemical processes, which had the capacity to turn base metal into gold, to cure the diseases of the human body, and to bring about spiritual regeneration and salvation. For Pulter, the spiritual side of alchemy is particularly important, and in several poems she draws on an established practice of reading alchemical processes, which were thought to separate superior substances from the inferior with which they were contaminated, as metaphors for the death and resurrection of Christ and ultimately for the purification of the human soul.³² As a woman, Pulter would not have been excluded from undertaking the chemical, or to use the early modern term, "chymical," processes associated with alchemy, which often formed part of woman's work within the home.³³ She may have encountered alchemical texts as they circulated in manuscript or in the form of popular publications such as Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652), an anthology of alchemical poetry. As Ashmole's text suggests, Pulter was not alone in drawing on discourses and imagery of scientific exploration in verse.

1979). For the place of astrology in Interregnum England, see Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 1–44.

31. Useful introductions to alchemy can be found in Stanton J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially 1–26, and Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

32. See, for example, "The Circle [2]" and "View but this tulip, rose, or July flower." For alchemical imagery in "The Circle [2]," see Jayne Elisabeth Archer, "A 'Perfect Circle'? Alchemy in the Poetry of Hester Pulter," *Literature Compass* 2 (2005): DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2005.00160x.

33. See Jayne Elisabeth Archer, "Women and Chymistry in Early Modern England: The Manuscript Receipt Book (c. 1616) of Sarah Wiggess," in *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Kathleen P. Long (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 191–216.

Life and Works

The details of Hester Pulter's life remain very much a mystery, although it is possible to put together a brief outline of the available facts. Pulter was the daughter of Sir James Ley, who would eventually become a privy counselor and the first earl of Marlborough, and his first wife, Mary, née Petty.³⁴ The images of Pulter's parents that emerge from surviving records suggest they were exemplars of the civic and family responsibility she promotes in her writing. James Ley was a prominent lawyer and antiquarian, active in the service of his monarch, and his wife is frequently praised for her piety and devotion to her family.³⁵ Pulter, the eighth of eleven children, was born between 1605 and 1607 when the family was living just outside Dublin following Ley's appointment as chief justice of the King's Bench in Ireland.³⁶ Pulter apparently never forgot her connection to the country of her birth and occasionally makes mention of it in her poetry.³⁷

It seems that the family left Ireland in 1608 when Pulter's father returned to England at the command of James I. They initially settled at Heywood in Wiltshire but later spent time in London before moving to Beckington in Somerset, where Mary Ley died in 1613.³⁸ We have no information about Pulter's childhood, and as a result we do not know, for example, how she was educated, or even where she was

34. Sir James Ley (1550–1629) (*ODNB*). For Mary Ley, see Alice Eardley and Demmy Verbeke, "Remembering Mary Ley (d. 1613): The Bilingual Commemorative Verses in the Harington Papers," *Lias* 35 (2008): 177–86.

35. It has to be acknowledged that James Ley's reputation as a statesman is mixed. See *ODNB*. Praise of Mary Ley can be found in the dedication to George Webbe, *God's Controversy with England* (London: F. K.[ingston] for William Leake, 1609), A5^v–A6^r, and in the epicede composed for her funeral. See Eardley and Verbeke, "Remembering Mary Ley," 182–85.

36. In a manuscript commissioned by James Ley now in the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office, "The Declaration of Ley; or Ley: His pedigree," (record number 366/1), Pulter's date of birth is given as June 1605. Other sources, including the manuscript itself, suggest Pulter may have been born in 1606 or 1607. For the conflicting evidence relating to Pulter's date of birth, see Alice Eardley, "Hester Pulter's Date of Birth," *Notes and Queries* 57, no. 4 (2010): 498–501.

37. See "Universal Dissolution," line 147, and "Vain Herostratus was so fond of fame," line 11.

38. P. Bingham, "James Ley, Earl of Marlborough," *The Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine* 25 (1890): 91–93.

living from 1613 onward, following the death of her mother and the marriages of several of her siblings. It seems likely, however, that she would have received an education befitting her status as the daughter of an earl, and a poem by John Milton dedicated to her sister Margaret appears to confirm this.³⁹ Milton praises Margaret for her learned eloquence and employs a series of complex allusions to the Greek orator Isocrates. He evidently expected his addressee, whom his nephew later described as a “woman of great wit and ingenuity,” to recognize and make sense of his references.⁴⁰ We might therefore suppose that Margaret had the education necessary to make this possible, and it is likely that Pulter, who was just a couple of years younger than her sister, had been educated alongside her.

According to her poetry, at some point when she was still a young teenager, Hester married Arthur Pulter (1603–1689), the son of Lytton Pulter and his wife, Penelope, née Capel.⁴¹ Both the Pulters and the Capels were prominent and wealthy Hertfordshire families, and the Capels in particular had significant connections to the royal court.⁴² Hester was just thirteen years old at the time of her marriage and Arthur was also a teenager, so it is likely she spent time living with her husband’s family until the couple were old enough to set up home for themselves. Their marriage had taken place at a particularly young age, even by the standards of the early seventeenth century.⁴³ It is possible that James Ley secured the marriages of his young daughters in an effort to ensure they were taken care of following the death of their mother. Ley himself remarried twice during 1618, first to Mary Bowyer and, after her death, to Jane Boteler, the seventeen-year-old

39. “Sonnet X. To the Lady Margaret Ley,” in *John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. John Carey (London: Longman, 2007), 289–90.

40. Helen Darbishire, ed., *The Early Lives of Milton* (London: Constable, 1932), 64.

41. In “Aletheia’s Pearl” she says that of the total number of years she has been alive she has spent “Thirteen a maid, and thirty-three a wife,” line 119.

42. Some indication of these connections is provided by the *ODNB* entry for Arthur Capel (1604–1649), to whom Pulter refers in “On the Same [2],” line 18.

43. At this point in the seventeenth century, the median age for wealthy brides was 19–23, while for the rest of the population it was 26–27. See Anthony Wrigley, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135.

niece of George Villiers, first duke of Buckingham and a notorious favorite of James I. Ley had court connections that he apparently never exploited on behalf of his daughters, choosing instead to marry them off to respectable local gentry.

Very little is known about Arthur Pulter. He matriculated at Queens' College, Cambridge in 1619, began training in the law at Lincoln's Inn in 1620, and went on to become sheriff of Hertfordshire in 1641, retiring a year later.⁴⁴ It would appear that until his death nearly half a century later he declined to take part in the local or national governmental responsibilities that would have been expected of a man of his class. This may account for some of Pulter's dissatisfaction with those she feels are neglecting their duty toward society as a whole. Several records suggest that Arthur may have been a particularly devout and scholarly man who devoted his time to writing and to God.⁴⁵ His patronage of Thomas Gardiner, the Presbyterian minister of the local parish church, may also have caused some tensions with his Laudian wife.⁴⁶ According to the early-eighteenth-century local historian Henry Chauncy, at least some of Arthur's time was dedicated to renovating the family's manor house, Broadfield Hall. Chauncy attributes Arthur's activities to "the importunity of his wife," indicating that Pulter had a key role in the developments.⁴⁷ Later descriptions

44. John Venn and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 1.3.406. Henry Chauncy, *The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire* (Dorking, UK: Kohler and Coombes, 1975), 1.145. Chauncy, whose history of Hertfordshire was first published in 1700, implies that the onset of the civil wars in 1642 may have forced Arthur to retire from this position, but there is nothing to suggest that he did not undertake the role for a full year, the usual length of service.

45. When he was twenty-two, Arthur's grandfather Edward left him all of his "books and [notes] and written papers of learning" in his will, TNA, PROB 11/149, 1625. Both Chauncy and the twentieth-century historian Reginald Hine refer to manuscripts by Arthur, now lost. See Chauncy, *Historical Antiquities*, 1.32, and Reginald L. Hine, "Portrait of an English Country Squire Based on the Household Account Book of James Forester of Broadfield Hall 1689-96," in *Relics of an Un-Common Attorney* (London: Dent, 1951), 17.

46. Some indication of Gardiner's Presbyterianism is provided by the fact that after the Restoration he was ejected from his position for refusing to read from the Book of Common Prayer. See A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised: Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy's Account of the Ministers and Other Ejected and Silenced, 1660-2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 217.

47. Chauncy, *Historical Antiquities*, 1.49.

of the property suggest that the building was designed to impress the social standing of its occupiers on the local community, a detail in keeping with the interest in status and social hierarchy evident in Pulter's writing.⁴⁸

It is at Broadfield that Pulter appears to have composed her poetry and prose, and she frequently refers to both the house and the garden.⁴⁹ The house itself was situated "upon a great hill among the woods," and even today the site is a significant distance from the nearest town.⁵⁰ The garden, including the flowers and insects living there, appears to have been a particular source of inspiration for Pulter. But despite the obvious pleasure she took in her surroundings, it is clear that there were times when she felt unduly isolated. At least some of these occasions may have coincided with the periods of confinement associated with childbirth.⁵¹ Between 1624 and 1648 Pulter gave birth to a total of fifteen children, only two of whom survived her. It is therefore unsurprising that several of her poems describe pregnancy and the births and deaths of her offspring.⁵² On occasion, she uses her poetry to express her extreme sadness and sense of loss, particularly relating to the early deaths of her daughters, Jane, who died aged just twenty-one, and Penelope, aged twenty-two.⁵³ Several of her children did, however, survive into adulthood, and many of them went on to

48. Chauncy, *Historical Antiquities*, 1.145. For a discussion of the house, see J. T. Smith, *English Houses, 1200–1800: The Hertfordshire Evidence* (London: HMSO, 1992), 81. Pictures can be seen in Chauncy, *Historical Antiquities*, 1, between 144 and 155, and Smith, *English Houses*, 123.

49. See "The Invitation into the Country," line 92; "To My Dear J.[ane] P.[ulter], M.[argaret] P.[ulter], P.[enelope] P.[ulter], They Being at London, I at Broadfield"; "The Garden, or The Contention of Flowers, to My Dear Daughter Mistress [Anne Pulter], at Her Desire Written," line 1; and "When fair Aurora, dressed with radiant light," line 17.

50. Chauncy, *Historical Antiquities*, 1.141

51. A period of "confinement" or "lying-in" usually lasted a month. See Adrian Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth and its Interpretation," in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, ed. Valerie Fildes (London: Routledge, 1990), 75.

52. For her pregnancy with and the birth of her son John, see "Universal Dissolution" and "This Was Written 1648." Poems referring to the deaths of several of her children are "The Invocation of the Elements, the Longest Night in the Year, 1655," "A Solitary Discourse," "Oh my afflicted, solitary soul," and "Come, my dear children, come and happy be."

53. See "Upon the Death," "On the Same [1]," and "Made When I Was Not Well."

marry.⁵⁴ Only her daughter Margaret had children of her own, however, and her son James Forester was eventually sole heir to the Pulter estate.

Beyond the immediate confines of the family home, the surrounding countryside also appears in Pulter's poetry, which includes references to local rivers, such as the Beane, the Colne, and the Lea, to the local village of Baldock, and to landmarks, including Gray's Spring (which was said to turn everything that went into it to stone), and the ruins of the ancient Roman city of Verulamium.⁵⁵ The county is situated just north of London and during the seventeenth century there were particularly good communication links between the two.⁵⁶ So while Pulter appears, and occasionally claims, to have been isolated to a rural estate, there would have been ample opportunities for her to make contact with people living in London, both in the form of visits to or from the capital and via the postal system. This may in part help to explain her evident knowledge of political, social, and intellectual developments occurring within the city.

There is particular evidence that during the period Pulter was composing her poetry she was in contact with relatives living in London, and it was apparently not unusual for her to visit them. Pulter's sister Dionysia was married to the MP John Harington, son of Elizabeth I's influential godson John Harington who translated Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1591), to which Pulter frequently refers. It is John Harington's diary that, outside of her literary manuscript, provides the most significant information about Pulter's life.⁵⁷ It

54. In 1672 the Pulters' eldest son, Arthur, married Amy, daughter of William Gumbleton. In 1680, while her husband, but not her mother-in-law, was still alive, Amy, posing as a man named James Howard, married the celebrity lutenist and soprano Arabella Hunt. The case was brought before the court and the marriage was annulled after six months of cohabitation. See Patricia Crawford and Sara Mendelson, "Sexual Identities in Early Modern England: The Marriage of Two Women in 1680," *Gender and History* 7, no. 3 (1995): 362–77.

55. "The Invitation into the Country," lines 91–124; "Some birds there be, sure they no love do lack," note in margin; "To My Dear J.[ane] P.[ulter], M.[argaret] P.[ulter], P.[enelope] P.[ulter]," line 2.

56. Holmes, *Eastern Association*, 8.

57. BL, Add MS 10,114. All references in this edition will be to *The Diary of John Harington, M. P., 1646–53: With Notes for his Charges*, ed. Margaret F. Stieg (Old Woking, UK: Somerset Record Society, 1977).

reveals, for example, that in 1647 Harington and Dionysia paid a visit to Broadfield. While Harington stayed only a few days, he notes that his wife remained with her sister for a period after he left.⁵⁸ He also records that in 1652 Pulter herself spent three weeks in London, a visit that centers on the death of her sister Margaret Hobson, the addressee of Milton's sonnet, who died that year.⁵⁹ While she was in London, Pulter apparently met with several relatives, including Harington, Margaret's widower James Hobson, and Harington's son Will. She also attended Harington's church and met with James Ussher, the archbishop of Armagh, Ireland, a scholar who was renowned for his exceptional learning. The evidence would suggest that while there may have been periods when Pulter was confined to her home, there were other times in her life when she more freely associated with her extended family and with their intellectual circles. It is plausible that the learned men with whom she was connected, including Harington and Ussher, kept Pulter abreast of the intellectual and political developments of interest within their communities.

Significantly, Pulter's engagement with her family would appear to conflict with the vehemently royalist tone of her literary manuscript. During the 1640s, the majority of Pulter's closest relatives were, at points, in active opposition to the king. Her sister Margaret, the news of whose death dominates Pulter's visit to London in 1652, married James Hobson, a lieutenant colonel in the Westminster regiment of the parliamentarian army.⁶⁰ During the early 1640s the couple, then living on Aldersgate Street in London, were close neighbors and friends of John Milton, a famous republican, and it is during this time that he composed "Sonnet X. To the Lady Margaret Ley."⁶¹ We know that Pulter remained in contact with her sister because Harington's diary records how, prior to her death, Pulter had "persuaded" her sister to convey her wealth "back to her husband's estate and kindred."⁶² Similarly, John Harington, with whom Pulter was associating at both

58. Harington, *Diary*, 47.

59. Harington, *Diary*, 75–76.

60. Henry St. George and Samson Lennard, *Wiltshire Visitation Pedigrees, 1623*, ed. G. D. Squibb (London: Harleian Society, 1954), 115.

61. Darbishire, *Early Lives*, 64.

62. Harington, *Diary*, 75.

Broadfield and London, had supported the parliamentary cause early in the Civil War.⁶³ Ultimately, however, he was a moderate who retired from public duty following Pride's Purge of Parliament in 1648, when all moderate MPs, who wanted to continue peace negotiations with the king, were either arrested or prevented from entering the House of Commons.⁶⁴ Ussher professed loyalty to the Stuart monarchy but was widely respected by people on both sides of the political divide, eventually being buried, at Oliver Cromwell's behest, in Westminster Abbey.⁶⁵ As this makes clear, during the Civil War and its aftermath, political loyalties often cut across families and other social connections. We do not know if Pulter's associates knew of the vehemently royalist views she expresses in her poetry, but her meetings with these people suggest a certain degree of flexibility and toleration in her outlook, enabling her to maintain family and social ties despite ideological differences.

In addition to the parliamentary members of her family, Pulter had several relatives who were prominent royalists. They included her nephew James, later the third earl of Marlborough, who fought for the king during the Civil War and had his estates sequestered (confiscated) in 1646.⁶⁶ He later died at the battle of Lowestoft in 1665, an event recounted in Marvell's "The Second Advice to a Painter."⁶⁷ In 1680 a

63. Harington's cousin was James Harington, author of the famous republican manifesto *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (London: J. Streater for Livewell Chapman, 1656); according to the diary, the two men met on a regular basis.

64. ODNB. Harington associated with a political group subsequently labeled "Royal Independents" who were committed to the preservation of a constitutional monarchy. See Valerie Pearl, "The Royal Independents in the English Civil War," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 18 (1968): 69–96; Valerie Pearl, "Oliver St. John and the 'middle group' in the Long Parliament, August 1643–May 1644," *English History Review* 81 (1966): 490–519; David Underdown, *Pride's Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 68, 72–73, 87, 104, 113, 203; and Blair Worden, *The Rump Parliament, 1648–1653* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 179, 278.

65. ODNB.

66. Mary Anne Everett Green, ed., *Calendar for the Proceedings of the Committee of Compounding, 1643–1660* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1889–1892), 1.77.

67. ODNB. Marvell writes: "Marlbrough, that knew and dared too more than all, / Falls undistinguished by an iron ball." See *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, rev. ed., ed. Nigel Smith (London: Longman, 2007), 339.

copy of James's supposed deathbed repentance, in which he provides an account of his religious views, was published alongside that of the notorious libertine John Wilmot, second earl of Rochester.⁶⁸ Another of Pulter's relatives to have her estates sequestered was her stepmother Jane, née Boteler, who had gone on to marry William Ashburnham.⁶⁹ This was a fairly common fate for supporters of the king, and the fact that the Pulters managed to keep hold of their lands is a good indication that, publicly at least, they retained a show of political neutrality. The most well known of Pulter's royalist relatives was Sir Arthur Capel (her husband's first cousin), who had been opposed to Charles' personal rule but, following his elevation to peerage in 1641, had opted to fight for the king.⁷⁰ Capel was captured and then executed by Parliament shortly after the regicide in 1649. Pulter remembers her "heroic kinsman" in a poem mourning the death of Charles I in which she states that the family's personal grief has been overwhelmed by their sorrow at the loss of the king.⁷¹ We have no evidence of Pulter's interaction with these members of her family, but it is possible they provided a source of information about the royalist war effort or enabled her to gain access to the royalist literature circulating in manuscript and print.

The English Civil War had a major impact on Pulter, and the majority of her extant literary works, the entire body of which survives in a single manuscript now preserved in the Brotherton Library in Leeds, were composed in response to the wars of the 1640s and the Interregnum of the 1650s. The main body of occasional and devotional poems, which constitutes the first section of the manuscript, was apparently written between the mid-1640s and 1655.⁷² These

68. The text was first published in 1665 as James Ley, *A Copy of the Earl of Marlborough's Letter to Sir Hugh P. Dated Aboard the Old James, April 24* (London: G. Bedell and T. Collins, 1665) and later as James Ley and John Wilmot, *The Two Noble Converts; or, The Earl of Marlborough and the Earl of Rochester their Dying Requests and Remonstrance, to the Atheists and Debauchees of this Age* (London: J. D. for Randal Taylor, 1680).

69. Green, *Committee of Compounding*, 1.77.

70. ODNB.

71. "On the Same [2]," lines 14–21.

72. Of the poems included in the main manuscript volume, the earliest that can be dated with any certainty is "To My Dear J.[ane] P.[ulter], M.[argaret] P.[ulter], P.[enelope]

poems directly refer to political events that were taking place and to the deaths, which occurred during those years, of several of her children. The emblem poems and the romance appear to have been composed after the main body of occasional and devotional poems had been completed. The romance can be dated to a period between 1655 and 1662, while the emblems, which refer in detail to the events of Cromwell's Protectorate, can be identified with the period between 1653 and 1658.⁷³ Surprisingly, given the vehement royalism that Pulter voices in her poems, there are no poems referring to the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, although it is possible there were poems that have not survived, or that have yet to be found. We know Pulter was still composing poems after the Restoration; several examples were added to the volume at a later date.⁷⁴ Aside from these poems, we have no information about the last two decades of Pulter's life, but it seems plausible that she continued to reside at Broadfield and continued to write. She died on April 9, 1678, and was buried in Cottered Church, not far from the home where she spent most of her life.

P.[ulter],” which must have been composed before Jane's death in October 1645. At the other end of the timeframe two poems can be dated to 1655: “The Invocation of the Elements, the Longest Night in the Year, 1655” and “Made When I Was Not Well.” Both refer to the death of Pulter's daughter Penelope, who died that year.

73. In one section of the romance Pulter paraphrases Francis Osborne, *Advice to a Son* ([Oxford]: Hen. Hall, 165[5]), providing some indication of the earliest date at which she could have begun writing. Sarah Ross concludes that the first half of the romance must have been added to the manuscript between 1661 and 1662, providing some indication that it had been completed by that date. See Ross, “Women and Religious Verse,” 160. The second half of the romance survives as a rough draft in Pulter's hand and may have been composed later. See figure 5.

74. “The Weeping Wish, January 1665,” “The Hope, January 1665,” and “Made When My Spirits Were Sunk Very Low with Sickness and Sorrow, May 1667, I Being [Sixty-One] Years Old.” See “Note on the Text,” below, for details.