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The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke, 1671?1714

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Elizabeth Freke has the distinction among my autobiographical acquaintance of being the memoirist I would least like to meet. This is not because she was toothless, lame, blind and probably bald and, as she said in 1711, 'a diseased criple with a rhumatisme and tisick confined to a chair for this eighteen months past' (p.158). It is because she wields her resentment like an iron ball swung round her head ready to let fly. Earlier extracts of the memoir which have appeared in anthologies and the partial edition of the *Remembrances* published in 1913 (1), clearly exhibited some of the most critical of all early modern comments on marriage. But they did not begin to do justice to the full bitterness of the original.

These are not remembrances in the sense of reminiscences. They are not a record of family or piety or maternal devotion, as many early modern women's memoirs might be categorised. They are explicitly 'remembrances of my misfortuns ... since I were marryed'. The bitterness is directed primarily, but by no means exclusively, at her husband and son, and with good reason. Her sister, her cousin (who is her financial agent), her tenants, and the Bishop of Norwich also mistreat her to varying degrees. All of these relationships are described in terms of property ? in relation to gifts (the cash value of which is always recorded), ingratitude or theft.

Her early years appear halcyon, although her mother died when she was seven years old, leaving Elizabeth the eldest of four surviving daughters. Her father, Ralph, a London lawyer with an estate in Kent and later

Wiltshire, helped by Elizabeth's maternal aunt, seems to have fully supplied the lack.

It all started to go wrong when she married her second cousin, Percy Freke, at the age of 30. Her relatively late age of marriage may suggest that her unfortunate temper was not merely a facet of later life. On the other hand, she was clearly very attached to her father and may reasonably have preferred to stay with him than to accept inferior offers of marriage. The *Remembrances* provide no indication of either why she accepted Percy, or why they married secretly in Covent Garden in 1672. The obvious supposition, since Percy was without means and had recently left the Middle Temple without being called to the bar, is that Elizabeth married for love. If this were the case her *Remembrances* would have been an excellent opportunity to excoriate the follies of love. But there is no mention of the circumstances of courting, and a single mention of love in reference to the couple's early years in London: 'Where I miscaried twice and had very little of my husbands company, which was no small grife to me, I being only governed by my affecttions in this my marrying' (p. 39). In 1673 they are married again with her father present, in Westminster, again without explanation.

The remainder of the *Remembrances* consists principally in the wrongs done to Elizabeth Freke. These must be summarised at some length to transmit the extraordinary flavour of the memoir. After the second wedding Ralph Freke settles on his daughter a portion of an Epping Forest mortgage of £500 a year. Within a few months Percy sells it (for £5700) without the knowledge of the trustees. Elizabeth writes 'This was nott kind, for now I were by itt turned outt of doors, and had not a place to putt my unfortunate head in; and all my fortune, being in money in a bankers hand, was in danger to be spentt by us or lost by him' (pp.38?9).

The following year (1674) Elizabeth and Percy resolve to try their fortunes in Ireland, where his father's estate is. However, she finds herself (just) pregnant, so returns to her father's Wiltshire house in October. In March one of her surviving three sisters dies; in April her niece dies; in June her son is born after a harrowing five days of labour, with four midwives in attendance, and he is not expected to live. He is christened Ralph after her father, and he does survive, the first of several miraculous recoveries detailed in the *Remembrances*.

When the boy is three months old, Elizabeth and Percy go forth to Ireland, leaving him with her father at nurse. In Ireland Elizabeth miscarries again, and is generally maltreated by her mother-in-law. The following April, they return to her father's for the boy, who was again not expected to live, but does. Ralph, clearly still concerned for Elizabeth's security, transfers a mortgage on Leeds Castle. However, the Frekes' attempt to gain possession is unsuccessful and Percy secretly sells the rights to Leeds Castle, 'tho he had promised my deer father to settle itt as itt was on mee and mine ? for which considerattion my father gave my husband up a bond he owed him of eight hundred pounds (800*l*) as he did another nott long before of 760*l*' (pp. 46?7). Finally in 1676 Ralph negotiates the purchase of the Norfolk manor of West Bilney, south-east of King's Lynn, on mortgage, and loans Percy the money to buy it for settlement on Elizabeth. Bilney is nearly 2700 acres (six tenements besides the manor farm), with a yearly rent of £413, and encumbered by Lady Richardson's dower of £133 5*s*. The couple return to Ireland and Ralph loans Percy another £1000 to purchase Rathbarry in County Cork in 1680.

In May 1682 Elizabeth returns to her father; the following February, Percy comes to fetch her to Ireland again:

> Butt on the ill usage I had there suffered from them, I positively refused ever more goeing with him ... Besides his last parting wish att Kingsaile (which was) <deleted: that he might never se my face more>; and this stuck deep in my stomack (p. 49).

However, July finds her heading back to Ireland, leaving her son at school in Wiltshire. Much to Elizabeth's distress, Ralph dies in April 1684, aged 88. His estate of £1000 per annum in land and several thousand pounds personal estate is entailed, and goes to his youngest brother's grandson.

Later that year, Percy and Elizabeth are in London, but she is 'with my cosin Clayton, wher I lay aboutt ten weeks and never had his company att diner with me ten tims. Which I canott forgett; itt was soes griveous to me' (p. 52). In September Percy returns to Ireland, leaving Elizabeth with £15 and their son. She goes to her sister in Kent until June 1685, 'I resolveing to try for a subsistance in Norfolk affter nine month stay with my deer sister Austin. <For which I presented her with six silver plats cost mee thirty six pounds (36). Eliz Freke>' (p. 53).

Young Ralph falls ill of the smallpox first, so they do not actually arrive in Lynn until September 1685. In December Percy finds her in Lynn and tries to make her join in the sale of Bilney, but 'God gave me the courage to keep whatt I had rather than part with itt and be kept by the charity of my friends or trust to his or any ones kindness. Soe in greatt anger Mr Frek leftt me alone againe and wentt for Ireland, wher he staid from me allmost two years' (p. 55). In February 1686 she came to take possession of one of the houses in West Bilney:

> When I came I had neither a bed to lye on, chair to sett on, table to eat on, or dish, or spoon, or bread to eate. Butt by Gods goodness to me I quickly gott all and my little house very well furnished, wher I lived by my selfe eight years in my thacht house, eight yeaers with ease and comfortt, tho every day threatned by the neighbours thatt iff I thought to nest myself att Billny I should wash my dishes my self and milk my cows too. Butt when I gott footing, I soon evidenced my right to itt and as fast as I could removed those thatt thretned to turne me outt of doores (p. 55).

Percy returns, and stays 'three months and five days to gett whatt mony he could from mee, which he did att least five hundred pounds. With which and some more' he bought £46 a year in the neighbouring parish of Pentney, and left again. He's back in 1688, when Rathbarry is burned to the ground and he is outlawed by James II. In 1691, his property is restored, and he's clearly also had a reconciliation with Elizabeth (although she never says so), since she goes back with him to Ireland the following year. Percy becomes MP for Rathbarry and High Sherriff of County Cork. In retrospect Elizabeth describes this period as a 'miserable life', 'sick the whole time'. But in 1693 she must have been planning to stay: Percy and Ralph go to Bilney to bring all the furnishings back to Rathbarry. But in May 1696 Elizabeth leaves again for England ? without explanation, and without Ralph, who is now 20. Four months later she arrives at Bilney, again to bare walls, 'the tennants run away with my rentt and every thing in a disorder' (p. 66). Finally at Christmas 1697 Lady Ann Richardson dies, and Elizabeth takes possession of the manor farm: 'I having bin marryed above six and twenty years and have had noe place to rest my wearyed carkas in butt troubling my frinds.' (p. 70) She was 56.

The following year Percy and Ralph come to see about matches in London. On the 10 August 1698,

> Mr Frek and my son Frek left mee all alone att West Bilney with two maids and a man and a hundred pounds a year in my hand and nott one peny to stock itt, he having before he left me took from mee my thousand pounds given me by my deer father and putt itt in his own name in the East Indy Company in order to remove itt for Ireland, which he did in Agust 18, 1702, with the intrest. This I thought very hard usage, butt tis true (p. 71).

In 1699 Ralph married without her consent or knowledge. If this upset her she doesn't say. From 1700, Percy is mostly at Bilney, clearly a sick man. Elizabeth herself, now over 60, fell down the great stairs in 1704 'and

were taken up allmost dead', kept to her chamber several months, 'knock'd out eight or nine of my best teeth, viz., all butt three in the upper sid of my mouth' (p. 88). Later that year Ralph visits for the first time with his wife and two sons, staying for six months at his parents' cost with no thanks, and denying Elizabeth's request to keep the boy John. When they leave for London, John dies after a pistol accident: 'I lost my child to show their undutifullness and cruellty to me, which God forgive them.'(p. 82)

Percy suffers months of fever, gout, asthma and dropsy, and Elizabeth nurses him faithfully until he dies in June 1706: 'att the fattall houre of my life and his death, I had nott one to help me in the house butt were frightned outt of my life, his soe suden leaveing of me and I nott able to hold him.' (p. 86) She gives him a splendid burial and monument in the church at Bilney (at a total cost of nearly £800). Having complained about him for over 30 years, she writes in the parish register that he 'left wretched me his unhappy widdow ... ever to lament him' (p. 87, n.144), and proceeds to bemoan his loss as bitterly. Elizabeth spends a month in London dealing with Percy's will, which left her an Irish estate for life, valued at £850, plus £1200 in arrears ? which she never enjoyed, due to the failure of her cousin John Freke to collect, and of her son to pay.

In early 1708 she starts to itemise gifts to her sisters, clearly proud that she is in a position to do so, having accepted so much from them in the past. In 1709 the tenants start to run off, leaving arrears (they are, of course, the ones that Percy took on), cousin John having failed to inform her that she had to rewrite the leases after Percy's death; her sister Austen refuses to let Elizabeth have any one of her children for company at Bilney; the servants steal from her because she cannot move out of her chamber. And then the Bishop of Norwich disputes her right to appoint the minister at Bilney. This produces copious correspondence, transcribed in the *Remembrances*, over the lack of glebe land in Bilney, and the fact that, since she pays the minister's stipend, she has a right to her peculier. All of these preoccupations take up her last five years, together with her misfortune 'to loose the best of husbands and [be] blest with the undutifullest of sons' (p.157). Elizabeth died in April 1714 and is buried in Westminster Abbey, memorialised with her sister Judith Austen by her sister Frances Norton in 1718.

Despite perpetually complaining of her husband's and son's taking money from her, she continues to give it to them. When her father in 1682 saw her 'looking a little malloncolly on some past reflecttions, he fancied it wass my wantt of mony; and ... went up into his closett and brought me downe presently in two baggs two hundred pounds, which 200*l* hee charged me to keep privatt from my husbands knowledge and buy needles and pins with it. ... and which the very next post I informed Mr Frek of, who presently found a use for itt' (p. 49). In January 1684 'My deer father sentt mee into Ireland a hundred pounds for a New Years guiftt, itt being my unhappy birth day, and ordered mee thatt iff Mr Frek medled with itt itt should be lost or he to answer itt with the Irish intrest to my son. But Mr Frek took itt from me' (p. 50). In all, Percy wrested over £3500 cash from Elizabeth, which he used to buy forfeited Irish land (p.13). Yet in June 1700, hearing Percy was near death at Bath, she goes 'soe fast as I could ... above two hundred milles in fowre days. Where tho I found him very ill, yett I humbly thank my good God hee was well enough to chid mee, tho nott seen me in neer three years before. This, tho itt was nott kind, I expected itt' (pp. 73?4). Three years later she pays off Percy's debts with their cousin John Freke.

Similarly with her son: in December 1702 she releases her thirds in Rathbarry to Ralph, and five years later she gives him £500 a year 'and three or fowre years arrears of my Irish estate to pay his debts thatt none myght be a looser by hime butt wretched Eliz Frek' (p. 94). In 1704 she buys her grandson an estate for £1500. In 1713, although Ralph has been behaving unbearably rudely and ungratefully in her house for months, she buys him a baronetcy at a cost of more than £500.

All her empire building came to nought: her grandson sold Bilney in 1750 and the baronetcy became extinct in 1764, when it failed in the male line. The estate passed through the female line to the Carberys, and the first editor of the *Remembrances* was a woman who married into the Carbery family.

There are two versions of these remembrances, one begun in 1702 when Freke was 60, and the second in 1712 when she was 70. (Anselment convincingly redates the two versions.) Why two copies? A great deal of

the second version is a verbatim copy of the first, although it appears that she was still recording in both volumes in the last years of her life. We may assume a copy for her only son, but was there someone else? Or perhaps a copy was made for posterity in general, perhaps to belong to Bilney itself.

Notably, the animosities have shifted slightly between the first and second versions. A side-by-side (rather than chronological) edition would be ideal to make a thorough comparison. However, the ordering is rather choppy and there are considerable repetitions. My impression is that the first volume is angrier with her husband and her son, while the second, begun after Percy's death, focuses ire more on Ireland and on her sister Austen. The 1712 version omits several sections of the 1702 version, notably the transcripts of letters between Freke and the Bishop of Norwich over who had the right to appoint the vicar at West Bilney, poems and history of Ireland, and the inventories of Freke's house at Bilney.

There were clearly many other documents in existence relating to Elizabeth Freke. Her recipes are not included here, and nor are the accounts compiled in 1709 and 1712 documenting the daily sums of money spent in Percy's final illness. Although little is made of it in the *Remembrances*, her inventory of 1711 lists 376 pints of cordials and several herbals and medical books, suggesting that Elizabeth doctored the neighbourhood. The court records of her many lawsuits are beyond the purview of this study, but may tell us a great deal more about the other sides of her disputes. (She is arrested in her chamber on more than one occasion.) The precise nature of sums in the *Remembrances* suggest that she was working from a contemporary account book, and perhaps a diary too. There were letters between Percy and Elizabeth, but these are almost never explicitly mentioned or quoted.

In addition to the power of her personality, the *Remembrances* tell us a great deal about daily life, notably sickness, the constant threat of fire, and the perils and exhaustion of travel (the crossing from Bristol to Kinsale or Cork could take anywhere from three days to two weeks, subject to storms, calms and privateers). Anselment is very good on the Freke genealogy, in placing the Frekes among the Irish Ascendacy and the English local gentry, and has searched the Norfolk parish registers for the Bilney tenants. His view that Elizabeth's misery 'stems in part from Freke's inability to end her dependency upon her father and commit herself completely to her husband' (p. 20), and his suggestion, in relation to the inventory Freke made in 1711, that 'measuring or accounting may have provided both diversion and reassurance amidst the tedium and fear of pain and age' (p.17) would not be mine. I would point instead to the inadequacies of English marital property law, and suggest that she took five days to make the inventory ? which included her five Exchequer tallies for £3000 in the funds, laid carefully between lace 'of my own work' and a new sheet in the 'portmantle trunk' ? before she set off to London to settle her final accounts with cousin John, because she expected (as she says) never to return alive and had no one else she could trust. For Elizabeth Freke, identity *is* property.

Although I am relieved not to have known her, I am fascinated to see Elizabeth Freke unleashed once more on the printed page.

Notes

1. *Mrs. Elizabeth Freke Her Diary, 1671 to 1714*, ed. Mary Carbery (Cork, 1913).Back to (1)

Professor Anselment writes: 'Thank you for including a review of Elizabeth Freke's *Remembrances* in *Reviews in History*, and I thank Professor Erickson for summarising from the edition a careful biographical sense of this early modern writer. Though I never respond to reviews of my work, I am pleased that your reviewer, too, found Elizabeth Freke fascinating'.

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