



John Souch (1593-1645), *Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of His Wife*. 203.2 x 215.1 cms (80 x 84.6 inches). Manchester Art Gallery 1927.150. Public Domain.

## UNFREEZING TIME

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William Wordsworth was a prodigious walker. One of his friends estimated that he had totalled 180,000 miles during his life, which works out at around seven a day – every day. In 1793, he set off from Bristol on a long ramble along the river Wye. On the way – or at least, according to how he chose to tell the story – he fell into conversation with a small girl who was around eight years old. She told the poet that she had six brothers and sisters: two of them were at sea, two of them had moved to Wales, and two

of them lay in the graveyard of the local church. However hard Wordsworth pressed her, the girl continued to insist that ‘We are Seven’:

Then did the little Maid reply,  
 ‘Seven boys and girls are we;  
 Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
 Beneath the church-yard tree.’

For her, it made little difference whether her siblings were at home or away, whether they were alive or dead. She seemed to feel that time was continuous between both sides of any physical departure from the living world: the clock of an individual’s existence ticked on after death rather than being brought to a

permanent standstill.

That type of belief permeates the massive multiple portrait that Sir Thomas Aston commissioned from John Souch immediately after the death in childbirth of his wife and their most recent baby. Four months later, the artist had finished this almost life-sized picture depicting a complex scene of mourning inside a room appropriately shrouded in black drapes. As well as expressing Sir Thomas's grief, it advertised both his religious devotion and his high social standing as a baronet and the widower of a wealthy heiress, Magdalene Poultney. Tellingly, the pious Latin text at the top left is about him, not her. Based on Psalms 23 and 116, in translation it reads

The sorrows of death encompass me in the year of grief, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1635, aged 35. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.

In the middle of the canvas, the sorrowing father rests his hand on a skull, a conventional *memento mori* reminder that human beings can enjoy only a limited time on this earth. Just below it, at the head of an empty crib swathed in black, another Latin inscription paraphrases a passage from St Paul's epistle to the Galatians. 'He who sows hope in flesh reaps in bones,' it admonishes viewers, reminding them that eternal life can only be achieved by focusing on spiritual matters. To reinforce these messages about temporality, a smaller second skull appears on a mourning ornament pinned to Sir Thomas's sash, just above a lock of hair suspended from a single pearl, symbol of purity. Overhead, the funeral hatchment uses heraldic vocabulary to depict that the couple's marital union is eternal and will last beyond the grave: 'virtue flourishes after death' announces a nearby text. The two families' coats-of-arms have been combined (or impaled), with Aston on the left and the Pulteney shield with its distinctive three black leopard heads on the right. Correspondingly, the surrounding laurel wreath is thriving on one side and withered on the other.

The picture is divided into two halves, male and female, by a strong diagonal line running through Sir Thomas's outstretched arm and emphasised by the white slash of his shirt that

shows through his black sleeve. To his right stands one of his sons, also called Thomas, at three years old still young enough to be wearing skirts rather than breeches, and sole survivor of the four children his wife had previously borne. Dressed in black and white, he is a miniature version of his father: the hat in his hand indicates that he is the rightful heir, while near his right arm a piece of parchment declares him to be 'the glory of his mother, the consolation of his father.' Sadly, he too died only a couple of years later, but here he and his father are both holding a fore-staff, a cross-shaped navigational instrument designed to measure stellar altitudes but here symbolising their steady faith in God's wisdom. Behind them, on the extreme left of the canvas, lies a lute with broken strings: family harmony has been disrupted by the death of the mother and yet another baby. The two male survivors have turned their backs on the globe, an emblem of transient worldly possessions – they are engaged in contemplating the long-term vista of eternal repose.

On Sir Thomas's inferior or sinister side are two women. One of them is his former wife, lying against pillows as if she were asleep, her face as white as the bed clothes that envelop her: this is Magdalene's earthly manifestation, captured in the permanent sleep of death and fulfilling the religious guidance 'to die in Christ, to *sleep* with him, and at his return, *arise*, and live for *ever* with him'. Churchyards were regarded as Christian dormitories, where the dead could sleep until summoned by an archangel.

Seated nearby, an enigmatic figure rests her head on her hand in a mournful gesture. Unsurprisingly, there is much scholarly debate about the identity of this woman in black, but she is often said to represent the persona of Sir Thomas's deceased wife. The gold ring hanging round her neck may signify her perpetual devotion to the family she has left behind. Although her body has been buried, her spirit lives on as a reminder of her virtue and her Christian salvation. Like the siblings of Wordsworth's eloquent young girl, she still counts as a member of the family.

Far more common than now, death during childbirth was often interpreted positively as a sign of the mother's everlasting virtue, as if the protracted suffering of labour

reenacted the passion of Christ on the cross. Souch's painting may well have provided Aston with daily reminders of the devoted wife waiting for him throughout eternity, but only four years later he married again. This time his wife and three children outlived him by many years: he died aged only forty-five after fighting for the Royalist cause in the English Civil War.

### Main Source and Further Reading

Dr Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University), *A Summary and Analysis of William Wordsworth's 'We Are Seven' – Interesting Literature*; accessible online.

Rosemary Keep, 'Birth, Death and Faith: Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife,' in Caroline Bowden, Emily Vine and Tessa Whitehouse (eds), *Religion and Life Cycles in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 241–59.

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