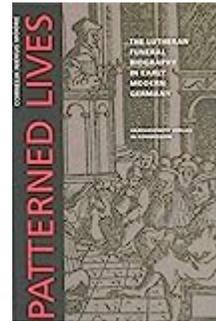




**Cornelia Niekus Moore.** *Patterned Lives: The Lutheran Funeral Biography in Early Modern Germany.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006. 403 pp. EUR 79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-447-05429-4.



**Reviewed by** Austra Reinis (Department of Religious Studies, Missouri State University)

**Published on** H-German (September, 2007)

### *Zum Ehren Gedächtnis—In Honorable Remembrance*

Martin Luther preached the first “Lutheran” funeral sermon in 1525 after the death of Saxon Elector Frederick the Wise. In doing so, he was continuing a tradition of funeral preaching for deceased rulers reaching back into the Middle Ages. By the middle of the sixteenth century, however, Lutheran preachers were beginning to preach at the funerals not only of rulers, but also of the lower nobility, citizenry, clergy, and members of university communities, men and women alike. By the last quarter of the sixteenth century, funeral sermons began to be printed as separate publications or funeral works. They also began to include biographical information, which increased in length and detail over time, so that one can speak of funeral biography as a literary genre.

Most of the extensive existing scholarship on German funeral sermons has focused on the funeral biographies appended to them; Cornelia Niekus Moore’s *Patterned Lives* maintains this focus. Her book goes beyond existing scholarship, however, in its attempt to survey the development of the genre of the funeral biography over the two hundred years of its existence. Given the at least

220,000 extant funeral sermons in public and private collections, such a survey is a daunting task. Moore chooses to focus on two thousand funeral sermons preached for members of three different social classes in three different cities: the lower nobility in Magdeburg, the citizenry in Brunswick, and the Saxon electors in Dresden. This sample enables her to demonstrate how not only class and gender, but also social, religious, and political circumstances in particular courts and cities influenced the writing of funeral biographies (p. 17). As is the case with any sample, however, this one has its drawbacks. It does not include funeral biographies from southern German cities such as Augsburg and Nuremberg, or for university communities such as Wittenberg or Tübingen. As the author herself is aware, “a funeral work you or I may read tomorrow might contradict even the most careful conclusions” (p. 18). The bibliography is divided into works cited before and after 1800; for the former the author indicates library and call number. Sources are also given for illustrations used in the book. The index, however, only lists persons; a topical index would have made information easier to access.

Chapter 1 discusses the funeral biography as a genre “situated in the rhetorical tradition of biographical writing” (p. 25). The early Lutheran preachers considered the funeral biography to belong to the *genus demonstrativum* (ceremonial discourse) of traditional rhetoric. They adapted this *genus* to the needs of the Lutheran funeral by giving it a specific structure: the funeral sermon had to include references to the baptism, Christian virtues, and last illness of the deceased, and had to assure the bereaved that their loved one had passed on to heavenly afterlife. Within this pattern, which stressed the common goal of salvation, other elements could be added to characterize the deceased individual (pp. 36-37).

Chapter 2 outlines the history of the Lutheran funeral biography. At the respective funerals of Saxon Electors Frederick the Wise and John the Constant (d. 1532), Luther preached sermons on biblical texts and Philip Melancthon delivered the biographical oration. At Luther’s own funeral in 1546, Johannes Bugenhagen preached the funeral sermon while the funeral oration again fell to Melancthon (pp. 93-94). As the tradition of the Lutheran funeral developed, the exegetical sermon and the biographical oration merged: the biography was appended to the sermon and was read by the preacher. The practice of printing funeral sermons came later than the custom of preaching them. The purpose of the printed sermon was to honor the deceased and bear witness to a good Christian life and death (p. 109). Soon collections of funeral sermons were published; these served as models for other preachers and as devotional literature for a wider literate public (p. 116).

Chapters 3 through 5 trace the development of the funeral biography in Magdeburg, Brunswick, and Dresden, respectively. The author’s most significant finding is that, over the history of the genre, a gradual movement toward secularization of both the funeral biography and the funeral ceremony took place in all three cities. She observes that for both Siegfried Saccus (cathedral pastor in Magdeburg from 1567 to 1596), and his immediate successor, Philip Hahn (cathedral preacher from 1596 to 1616), the primary purpose of the funeral sermon and biography was religious: to witness to the salvation of the deceased (p. 143) or to move to devotion the hearts of the living (p. 149). The fulfillment of these tasks changed dramatically toward the end of the seventeenth century, when less costly silent funerals, held in the evening, became popular. The removal of the sermon made the funeral ceremony a largely secular affair (pp. 161-162). Notwithstanding the differences in social class, the same gradual move toward secularization of the funeral cer-

emony and biography observed in Magdeburg can also be seen in Brunswick and Dresden. In the first two (of three) funeral sermons that Martin Mirus preached for August of Saxony (r. 1553-86) the religious component is prominent. In the first sermon August is held up as an ideal ruler just like Josiah of the Old Testament. In the second, the elector’s concern for churches and clergy is praised (pp. 217-219). A hundred years later, however, the biography read at the funeral of John George III (r. 1680-91) by court preacher Samuel Benedict Carpzov had “changed into a *vita*, a document in memory of the elector, with a very tenuous relationship to the funeral and to any connotations associated with the religious aspects of such a ceremony” (p. 259). Though none of the electors were buried at a silent funeral, such funerals had become a prerogative of the nobility by around 1680 (p. 269).

The author’s attention throughout the book to funeral biographies for women as well as for men makes it a valuable contribution to women’s history. Because both men and women could be good Christians, “the funeral sermon was potentially egalitarian”; about one third of extant funeral sermons are for women (p. 49). The author notes with regret that although most of the Saxon electresses forged for themselves a distinctive role at court, their funeral biographies are unremarkable: “The person who comes across in most of them is a pious self-effacing Esther, who served as a matriarch to her subjects, lived a pious life, and died a pious death” (p. 265). The author hypothesizes that when dowager electresses did not live at court, court preachers may not have known them well enough to be able to provide much biographical detail.

Interesting are the author’s occasional comments on the thematic connections between sermon and biography. She notes that Brunswick preacher Johann Wagner, who became pastor in 1593 and subsequently served as superintendent from 1606-22, consistently provided his parishioners with a solid exegetical sermon and a “professional” biography. Sermon and biography were thematically linked. Often the sermon text had been chosen by the deceased. Sometimes it was linked with the biography of the departed individual. The funeral sermon for Wilhelm Justus, a physician, for instance, was based on the text of Sirach 31:1f.: “Honor thy physician.” The sermon for Marshal Benedikt MÅ¶ller took up the topic of the spiritual battle for repentance and faith, while the biography described MÅ¶ller’s successful deathbed struggle against spiritual temptations (pp. 192-193). But how did Wagner develop the Sirach passage? What did he say about repentance and faith? Moore’s study of funeral biographies points to a lacuna in the scholar-

ship on funeral sermons: the dearth of theological studies, let alone a comprehensive overview of the content of the funeral sermons to which the biographies are appended. What theological themes were treated in the sermons? Which scripture passages were preferred? Were the themes treated in the sermons for women different from those in the sermons for men? Did the theology of the sermons change over time to express the more practical, ethical Christianity that the biographies came to reflect? Were some preachers more skillful than others at comforting and consoling their flock?

The author appropriately begins her sixth and final chapter by reflecting on the reasons for the disappearance of the printed funeral work. She writes that the decline of the funeral sermon and biography “likely reflected changing trends in eighteenth-century thought regarding the human condition” (p. 280). With the advent of the Enlightenment, the immortality of the soul and, more widely, Christian revelation came to be ques-

tioned (p. 280). In Germany the Enlightenment led not to a rejection of Christianity, but to an emphasis on a more practical, ethical, faith: “The trend toward a more secular burial signified a shift from an eschatological emphasis on the hereafter to an emphasis on a (still virtuous) life in the everyday world” (p. 281). The acknowledgment speech (*Abdankungsrede*, *Trauerrede*, or *Parentatio*), given after the silent funeral by a relative or by a member of the clergy, eventually replaced the funeral sermon and biography (p. 283). The chapter closes with a final, wistful, observation concerning women’s history: the demise of the printed funeral work meant that the ordinary Christian woman “had lost a claim to printed immortality” (pp. 313-314).

Eminently readable, Cornelia Niekus Moore’s latest book is, and likely will remain for years to come, the definitive English-language introduction to the Lutheran funeral biography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Austra Reinis. Review of Moore, Cornelia Niekus, *Patterned Lives: The Lutheran Funeral Biography in Early Modern Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13607>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).