



Kate Bolton Bonnici //

Elizabeth Stile was executed in England for witchcraft in February 1579. In what follows, I consider an anonymous “news of the day” pamphlet about her case, using critical poetry as scholarly method. (This pamphlet is part of a larger genre of 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup>-century writing on witchcraft trials.) I concentrate on the description of her precarious physical deterioration after confession and incarceration. According to the pamphlet, Mother Stile, a widow *of the age of lxxv. yeres, or there aboute*, went from being *so well in healthe of bodie and limmes* that she walked the 12 miles to jail to a state of utter abjection—*the vse of all her limmes and senses, were taken quite from her, and her Toes did rotte of her feete*.<sup>1</sup>

I respond to the story of Stile’s spiral into sickness through philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century contemplations on the vortex. Agamben considers the vortex to be the pulse of water, language, and becoming. The vortex (or spiral or helix or whirlpool) has movement, shape, direction, and rhythm. It is both historical origin and the present into which we fall. Like the turning-returning eddy that occurs “[w]hen the water flowing in a river encounters an obstacle,”<sup>2</sup> we can perceive that the erasures and occlusions of historical documents demand multiple contact points. This is especially true where they have been written by those with authority (religious, medical, political, etc.) to portray those without it (here, an elderly, ill, impoverished woman).

The form of this response, which draws upon a feminist archival poetics, echoes the vortex. In doing so, I seek revolving and evolving exchanges across source-texts, scholarship, and art. “A poet

is the one who plunges into this vortex,” Agamben writes, “. . . to take back signifying words from the flow of discourse and throw them into the whirlpool.”<sup>3</sup> Such a plunge is my hope.

The left-sided text, to which I have added line breaks but maintained original spelling, comes from the pamphlet titled *A Rehearsall both straung and true, of hainous and horrible actes committed by Elizabeth Stile, Alias Rockingham, Mother Dutten, Mother Deuell, Mother Margaret, Fower notorious Witches, apprehended at winsore in the Countie of Barks. and at Abbington arraigned, condemned, and executed, on the 26 daye of Februarie laste Anno. 1579.*<sup>4</sup> The right-sided text, with line breaks also added, comes from Agamben’s chapter on “Vortexes” in *The Fire and the Tale* (62). The middle words are mine.

*Also this is not to be forgotten,  
that the said mother Stile,*

still, reader, remember the said and picture her  
no longer one of four but a lone life, alone even.

*Even in the course of our life,  
the vortex of the origin remains present*

preserving through inclination how the singular  
self or body comes to the fore as a bright being,

*bee yng at the tyme of her apprehension,  
so well in healthe of bodie and limmes,*

limned by shadows, molecular chains not wearing  
forgetting until touched, in-breaths, swearing still

*until the end and silently accompanies  
our existence at every moment.*

Momentous old mother, stride, out-bounding,  
cover ground like seven-league boots, like that,

*that she was able, and did goe on foote,  
from Windsor vnto Readyng vnto the Gaile,*

this jail, the gaoler’s grail (iambic thus drunk  
from), if not now then, yes, at another time.

*At times it gets closer; at other  
times it distances itself*

from healing: hell’s helix—why confession when  
communion marks the turn from need to known,

*whiche are twelue miles  
distaunt.*

Too far to touch or taste these trauailed miles,  
too far to hear what's coming, to see so much,

*so much that we are no longer  
able to glimpse it*

(in-between: turned milk, village untwinings,  
solar storms radiating, palpable and unread).

*Shortly after that she had made  
the aforesaied confession, the other Witches*

elsewhere accused of sending dogs, toads.  
If one sends bees, one wonders how to see

*or to perceive its hushed swarming.  
But, at decisive moments, it seizes us*

through seizure or trance or dreamspoke, or our  
wanting mouths were seized or our seizing wants

*were apprehended, and were brought  
to the said Gaile, the said Mother Deuell*

(the said-devil brought back to mother-  
form, which remains our present origin

*and drags us inside it;  
we then suddenly realize that we are*

not alone still turning and we long only to be  
still again or to forget what our longings did)

*did so bewitcher her and others  
(as she confessed vnto the lailer)*

as she wished unto the confessor, can you assemble  
bits, pieces, what's become of these our portions?—

*ourselves nothing other than a fragment  
of the beginning that continues to spin*

the threads we tell, which I imagine  
medical, empirical, blood-withered

*with her Enchauntmentes, that the vse of all  
her limmes and senses, were taken quite*

quiet. How to hear the last breath?  
How to care without a last curing

*in the whirlpool from which  
our life derives,*

desire, derivative, drawn late and lonely, desire  
the been-widowed, age-scratched, alms-bound:

*from her, and her Toes did rotte of her feete,  
and she was laied vppon a Barrowe,*

barren or barely outlasting what turbulence  
comes from *crowd*, from *commotion*—full too,

*to swirl in it until  
it reaches the point of infinite*

(which is not a point and which crumbles under  
the crowds) crowing, the body's failing finitude

*as a moste vglie creature to beholde,  
and so brought before the Iudges,*

once book, then door, the threshold is not absence  
but a before-presence, there at the missing, builds

*negative pressure  
and disappears—*

disappears as a body in a barrow, on the bier,  
toes, alms, love, and luck lost, even curses lost

*at suche tyme as she was arraigned.*

Rain spit down like time spit down

*unless chance spits it out again.*

1. *A Rehearsall both straung and true, of hainous and horrible actes committed by Elizabeth Stile, Alias Rockingham, Mother Dutten, Mother Deuell, Mother Margaret, Fower notorious Witches, apprehended at winsore in the Countie of Barks. and at Abbington arraigned, condemned, and executed, on the 26 daye of Februarie laste Anno. 1579.*

2. Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa, Stanford University Press, 2017 (57).
3. Agamben 62.
4. The quoted pamphlet, which was “[i]mprinted at London for Edward White at the little North-doore of Paules, at the signe of the Gun, and are there to be sold,” is held by the British Library and resides in digital form on *Early English Books Online*. I have silently changed the long s.

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