

# ABSTRACT FORM D

## Final Report of Grant Funded by the Research and Creative Productions Committee

Title of Research or Creative Production: Gone to Heaven: Agnes Beaumont and the Nonconformist Tradition in England

Department: Geography, Government and History

Name of Grant Recipient(s) Alana Cain Scott

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### Summary:

*The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont* is a classic nonconformist text depicting the religious persecution experienced by Beaumont in her hometown of Edworth, Bedfordshire during the 1670s. While this piece has been traditionally treated as a piece of literature, one can argue for its validity as an historical source. As such, Beaumont provides an interesting case study for the role of women in late Stuart England in general and the role of nonconformist women in particular.

Nonconformists were people who rejected the established Church of England to gather in their own "separate" congregations. Beaumont was a member of John Bunyan's Baptist church in Bedford. In the winter of 1674 her father disinherited her, both for her adherence to her Baptist beliefs and commitment to her Baptist church. She reconciled with her father, but he died a few days later. Beaumont was accused of patricide, and it was at this moment that she began to experience her "persecution" and was forced to defend herself in court. Her defense was impeccable. She was declared innocent and her accusers reprimanded.

However, the entire episode provides historians with research material important for attempting to understand this period. Nonconformist churches survived despite such persecution, partially through the determination of female members such as Beaumont. Yet, the role of women within these congregations, and thus in the nonconformist tradition, has long been misunderstood by historians. A study of Beaumont's situation helps to develop an authentic historical interpretation.

### Results:

In June 2001 I traveled to England and spent three productive weeks at the British Library in London and four days at the Bedfordshire Record and Archive Office in Luton, Bedfordshire. While in England I examined many primary documents including the diary of Agnes Beaumont, the parish records, tax records, prison records, local village council records, as well as secondary items not available in the United States. I supplemented my findings in England with several trips to the William T. Young and Margaret King Libraries of the University of Kentucky in Lexington.

Final use of project results, e.g., Where was it published? At what professional meeting was it presented? How was it disseminated to the academic or regional community?

While in England I was invited by Middlesex University-Tottenham Campus to lead a Colloquium discussion on my research and I did so on July 5, 2001.

I gave two conference presentations on the results of my research. The first was 19 October 2001 at the Ohio Valley History Conference at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. The second was 1 November 2001, in Toronto, Canada, at the annual meeting of the North American Conference of British Studies. I should add that I am particularly pleased about the second presentation because this conference is the most prestigious British history conference in North America and it is very difficult to have a paper accepted.

Now that I have presented these two papers I have the feedback necessary to complete the article-length manuscript. At the moment I plan to submit the manuscript to the journal *Biography*, which deals with problems of historical interpretation, but will also send a query letter to *Bunyan Studies*. Beaumont was a member of John Bunyan's church in Bedford, England.

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### Detailed Final Report:

In the grant proposal, the applicant stated that her short-term objectives included the presentation of conference papers and the submission and completion of journal articles. The applicant gave two conference presentations at separate conferences, one regional conference and one national conference. The national conference paper was required to be submitted in advance for formal comments—a draft of this paper is attached. The regional conference was more informal and consisted of a lecture/presentation of the main points with a moderator to facilitate the question and answer period between the presenter and the audience.

While the article-length manuscript has not been completed, a query letter with accompanying abstract was sent to the journal *Biography* to inquire about the interest level of such a manuscript. A copy of this abstract has been included.

## "Gone to Heaven: Agnes Beaumont and the Nonconformist Tradition in Late Stuart England"

By Alana Cain Scott, Morehead State University

Arising in the 1650s under the religious freedom of the Interregnum governments, Baptist churches became an integral part of English communities such as Bristol, Fenstanton and Bedford. Perhaps the most famous of these churches was the Bedford Independent Church because its preacher, John Bunyan, had risen to national prominence through the publication of devotional works and spiritual treatises, most memorably *Pilgrim's Progress*. Throughout the later Stuart period, from the Restoration in 1660 to the death of Queen Anne in 1714, these churches survived through the passionate ministry of their members, many of whom experienced imprisonment, fugitive lifestyles, and alienation from their families through their rejection of the established religious authority, the Church of England, and from the government's stubborn insistence on conformity to that church's polity and discipline.

Agnes Beaumont (1652-1720) was one such member. In 1672 she joined Bunyan's church at Bedford despite the rigid disapproval of her father, John Beaumont, who subsequently disinherited her and exiled her from the family home. Though she briefly reconciled with him, she was accused of murder when he suddenly died. She then appeared before a coroner's inquest consisting of a tribunal of local magistrates and jurors from the community. After she gave a persuasive personal defense, the judge declared her innocent of the charges against her.

Beaumont's account of her experience forms the basis of *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont*, a classic nonconformist text. This work has now

been recognized as an important work within the nonconformist tradition because it provides a first-person account of one woman's spiritual experience in the midst of religious and personal persecution. For the most part, it has been treated as a piece of literature, as an example of the type of devotional tracts that include John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, unique because it was penned by a woman and printed as a testament to feminine religious commitment. Beaumont herself becomes a hero in the story, and thus a model for other believers who face the type of oppression she faced. A study of *The Narrative* as literature is very important. Tamsin Spargo argues that Beaumont "has been effectively denied the position of author . . . [even though] her narrative . . . challenges the patriarchal values of the seventeenth century and . . . the discursive framework of literary studies which has continued to marginalize her writing."<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Lynch notes the strand of individualism in Beaumont's writing, a level of confidence that one can attribute to an emerging sense of self.<sup>2</sup> Other writers have noted the importance of understanding the literary tradition in trying to understand nonconformist culture.<sup>3</sup>

However, one can also examine the piece for its historical significance. Vera Camden has edited *The Narrative* and settled its position as a primary source. But what of the work's context? What kinds of forces intertwined to create Beaumont's situation, and what other forces contrived to set her free? With these questions in mind, one can employ the work as a window into the lives of nonconformist women in late Stuart England. One can draw some preliminary conclusions about the life of nonconformist women through reading *The Narrative* and discussing its context.

One must first know some of the details of Beaumont's experience. The Beaumonts were a prosperous farming family in Edworth, a small village in Bedfordshire. Beaumont was the youngest daughter and when her mother died she took over the management of her father's household. In 1674 she was 24 years old and unmarried, though she had received several proposals.<sup>4</sup> Her father had allowed her to reject these proposals, probably because he wanted her to remain at home and continue to take care of him. She had several siblings; the Edworth parish register records the baptisms of five siblings including Thomas, Mary, William, Elizabeth, and John.<sup>5</sup> Curiously, the youngest brother John plays the greatest role in the story.

It is hard to tell when Beaumont became involved with the nonconformists in Bedfordshire. She became a member of Bunyan's church in Bedford in November 1672, just over a year before her father's death in February 1674.<sup>6</sup> That February, her father John Beaumont forbid her attendance at a meeting in Gamlingay, one of the congregations of Bunyan's church. She readily admits her father's reluctance to allow her attendance at this meeting, praying that "God would please to make way for my going and make my father willing, who would sometimes be against my going."<sup>7</sup> Her brother John and his wife were going to the meeting, but there of course was no room for her on the horse they were riding. This latter fact seems to counter the belief by some historians that Beaumont was forbidden to attend the meeting because of her family's commitment and active participation in the local parish church.<sup>8</sup>

When Bunyan rode through the village that afternoon, however, the younger John Beaumont persuaded him to take his sister up behind him, and she rode behind him to the church meeting. Bunyan did not want to take Beaumont, stating, "If I should carry you, your father would be grievous Angry with me" but she was insistent and told him she would accept the consequences.<sup>9</sup> It is actually the ride to the meeting that condemns Beaumont, not her attendance at the meeting.<sup>10</sup> On the way they rode past and scandalized one of Agnes's neighbors, a Mr. Lane, who was quick to return to Edworth and report her behavior to her father. When she returned home that night, this time riding with a female neighbor, she found the house locked tight, and despite her pounding on the door her father would not let her in. She spent the cold February night in the barn.<sup>11</sup>

Only after promising not to return to Bunyan's church was she allowed back into her home a few days later. Late one evening, her father became very ill and died before morning. His symptoms were so mysterious that the doctor could not explain his death. A neighbor accused Beaumont of poisoning her father because of his threat to disinherit her. As a criminal suspect she was charged both with poisoning her father, of murder, and of witchcraft through treason. Yet when the coroner called a special inquest with witnesses and jury she was cleared.<sup>12</sup>

One can consider Beaumont's religious context in trying to understand the place of nonconformist women. Much work has been done on the contributions of women to the progress of English nonconformity. Some historians have suggested that such churches allowed women "to rebel against the societal, political, and

religious restrictions which had hitherto repressed them."<sup>13</sup> The Bedford church provides a good example. In 1650, the church was founded by eight women and four men. Church records from 1673 to 1693 reveal that there were twice as many female members as male members.<sup>14</sup>

However, evidence of women's participation in the life and mission of the churches is sometimes difficult to interpret. By examining the church records, one can see that pervasive attitudes about women and feminine sexuality frequently followed women into these havens. In 1679, Mary Smith had been a member of the Broadmead Baptist Church in Bristol for over five years when someone reported to the elders that she had become pregnant out of wedlock. Though she insisted that she had been raped, she was brought before the congregation. Despite tears and pitiful pleas she was "cast out" of the congregation, excommunicated, for the sin of fornication. At a later date, she would be readmitted to the church if she exhibited holy living over a period of time.<sup>15</sup> Merry E. Wiesner has pointed out that early modern Europeans believed that "pregnancy was widely viewed as proof that the woman had had an orgasm, which proved it wasn't rape."<sup>16</sup> Lynch argues that nonconformity "reinforced rather than challenged familiar patterns of gendered exclusion and marginalization."<sup>17</sup>

A study of the church records can help shed some light on the religious experience of these women, and thus on Beaumont. Though Beaumont was technically a member of John Bunyan's gathered church at Bedford, she frequently attended meetings of the Gamlingay congregation, probably due to its proximity to

Edworth. The Bedford church also held meetings in Kempton, Mauldon, Cotton End, and occasionally in Edworth.<sup>18</sup> This church maintained the practice of open communion but had strict regulations regarding discipline and polity.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the record of her baptism and her place on the church rolls a year later, Beaumont is not mentioned in the church records. However, a look at these church records show the work of women within these churches, and therefore can shed some light on Beaumont's experience as a woman within such a congregation.

The church records note the prominent role women played in the founding of these separatist congregations.<sup>20</sup> The Baptist Church in Stevington was founded by 58 men and 101 women, the women being the most vocal in their opposition to the Church of England.<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Hazzard looms large in the founding of the Broadmead Baptist Church. Her actions at the siege of Bristol during the English Revolution gave her a special heroic image. She and several other women took charge of one of the gates into Bristol and filled it with dirt, preventing the royalist troops from entering the city. Her religious convictions led her to openly protest and countermand Church of England mandates. She stopped attending all but the sermon portion of the Anglican service; if she disagreed with the sermon she said so roundly. She kept her shop open on the holy days even though she was fined and imprisoned twice.<sup>22</sup>

Once the churches were established, women participated in the life of the church in many ways. The Broadmead Baptist Church had deaconesses who visited the sick female members.<sup>23</sup> At the church in Fenstanton, female church members

raised money to supplement the pension of a pastor's widow. Nonconformist women often opened their homes for nonconformist church meetings and offered hospitality to fugitive preachers. They might sponsor missionaries or patronize the printing of nonconformist tracts.<sup>24</sup>

Women were both admonished for their actions and compelled to perform acts of admonition themselves. Some churches, like the Broadmead church, believed that sinners should be removed from the church so as not to "infect" the rest of the congregation, through excommunication.<sup>25</sup> Before individuals were excommunicated they were warned, or "admonished," to reform themselves and return to the godly path. The Bedford church sent women to admonish the guilty female members of the congregations.<sup>26</sup> After the incident with Mary Smith, the Broadmead congregation chastised her neighbor, a Sister Ship, for not watching over her properly. In 1670, the Bedford church records describe a meeting between two of the sisters of the congregation and "Sister Abbis," who was admonished for her sin--which was not named--yet confessed and was welcomed back into the church fellowship.<sup>27</sup> Sister Landry was admonished for criticizing church order.<sup>28</sup> There is no account of Beaumont either being admonished or doing to admonishing, the latter probably because of her youth. Since there is no record of her being admonished, one can assume that Beaumont was a model church member, not prone to licentious behavior or unruly questioning of church order. Church records emphasized the "errant and aberrant behavior," not the normal.<sup>29</sup>

In most cases, church discipline treated men and women equally. Elizabeth

Watkins was admonished and then excommunicated for begging. She had gone up and down the streets of Bristol borrowing money without paying it back. Moreover, the congregation did not perceive that she had ever attempt to earn money to pay off her debt. The Broadmead Church excommunicated her on 7 October 1679; she had been under admonition for about a year.<sup>30</sup> However, the church records are filled with instances where men were admonished and the excommunicated for similar practices. Edward Dent was admonished and then excommunicated for incurring loans he could not pay.<sup>31</sup> There are also several instances where men are admonished for mistreating their wives. John Stanton was excommunicated from the Bedford church for beating his wife; though he had been admonished deveral times, he refused to stop.<sup>32</sup>

A look at Beaumont's social and economic context can also help inform our understanding of her situation. Her accusers were unsuccessful in their efforts, so one can first consider her judicial position. Keith Thomas has discussed how "local opinion" could punish "nonconformity and social deviation" in this period. Apparently a bad reputation, or "ill fame," justified prosecution in ecclesiastical court. Even in common law courts the judges accepted that the witnesses "were not impartial assessors, but members of the community from which the offender had sprung . . . well-informed about his general standing in the community."<sup>33</sup> In this case, it is clear that Beaumont's position within the community was secure. True, as J. A. Sharpe has stated, that gossip was important. He states that "it was gossip, and the knowledge that behavior would be commented upon and that reputations could be

lost, which helped reinforce and reassert . . . normative restrictions." Yet, at the heart of all of these restrictions was the previous standing of the person being slandered. Sharpe adds that it would make a difference if "enmity . . . already existed" and whether charges were made out of spite.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Beaumont, we know that her chief accuser was a Mr. Feery, who was also a rejected suitor. Given the fact that Beaumont expected to receive an inheritance of at least 150 pounds from her father, it is possible that Feery harbored well-known resentments against the young woman. Even after Beaumont's acquittal Feery disliked her, persuading her brother John to sue her for part of the inheritance, which she gave him for "peace and quietness."<sup>35</sup> Beaumont apparently believed herself secure enough later to visit the Bigglesworth market and flaunt her freedom, proudly claiming, "and when I came into the market, the poor people could not follow their business . . . [because] almost all of the eyes of the market were fixed upon me."<sup>36</sup>

One then must determine why Beaumont's position was so secure, her reputation so difficult to tarnish. A contributing factor could have been the significant nonconformist population in the area. Of the 59 people who lived in Edworth, 20 termed themselves nonconformists in 1671.<sup>37</sup> This means that about one-third of the people living in Edworth considered themselves to be nonconformists. While this is a meaningful percentage, it apparently was not unusual in Bedfordshire. In Bedford there were five parishes, with a 1671 population of 2130 with 121 reported nonconformists in 1669. Apparently, Beaumont could usually depend on a variety of people for a ride to the church meeting, and Bunyan felt free to stop in the village at

a moment's notice.<sup>38</sup>

This could have meant that Beaumont had sympathetic participants at her trial. A jury from the nearby town of Bigglesworth listened to Beaumont's testimony. Considering the nonconformist population of Bedfordshire, one can conclude that at least a few of the jury members were sensitive to Beaumont's religious position. If Beaumont's account of the trial is factual, then it is clear that even the coroner, acting as the judge, was very supportive of her. Throughout her account of the events, the judge asked her questions in a kind manner, even calling her sweetheart on occasion. He also praised her for her godliness and commitment to her faith, so one can wonder whether he also had nonconformist tendencies. "Bless God for this deliverance," he tells her, "and never fear but God will take care of thee . . . We are all well satisfied of thy innocence." Not only is Beaumont declared innocent, but her accusers are chastized.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, Beaumont's family standing in Edworth could have contributed to her security. The Bedfordshire parish registers note that the Beaumonts were "among the more substantial farmers," with the male members of the family termed "gentlemen."<sup>40</sup> This is curious given that many of the Bedfordshire nonconformists came from the poorer sections of the population, though some members of Bunyan's Bedford congregation were artisans, such as lace-makers. One can say see based on seeing how many families in Bedfordshire were exempted from paying the Hearth Tax.<sup>41</sup> So the socio-economic status of the her family might have protected Beaumont.

Not that Beaumont followed all of her family's expectations. Clearly Beaumont's situation shows that nonconformist women frequently rejected conventional family relationships. In fact, Camden claims that Beaumont's experiences "emerges from the tensions voiced in the debate over the analogy between the family and the state."<sup>42</sup> Perhaps Beaumont's belief in the doctrine of free grace, one of the characteristics of the Bunyan church's doctrine, encouraged her resistance to traditional institutions. Nonconformist rejection of the established authority of the Church of England could resonate in other family relationships, causing conflict between daughters and fathers and between wives and husbands. Alice Cook was recognized and accepted into the Bunyan church's membership on a single Sunday because "she might be hindred her duty if her Husband heard it."<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, Separatist churches often coopted family authority. They wanted to govern the lives and behaviors of the church members. For example, church records show that the churches wanted to control who the members of the congregation married, sometimes contravening the desires of the members' parents. Members were also admonished for marrying without the approval of the congregation. The Bedford church admonished Sister Gates because "she had Married A Carnall Man."<sup>44</sup> Sister Thorowgood was discouraged from sitting with Thomas Killingworth during the church service, and they were eventually warned not to take communion together.<sup>45</sup> Yet, again, many of the restrictions placed on women were also placed on men. The Bedford church sent several men to Brother Hubbert's house to prevent him from marrying a woman of whom the church disapproved.<sup>46</sup>

Though nonconformist women were taught that they had freedom of worship, yet they frequently had little freedom at home.<sup>47</sup> The religious beliefs of many of these women allowed them to transcend the drudgery of their everyday lives. Beaumont cared for a demanding father yet her spirituality prevented her from feeling resentment. She states that, "there was scarce a corner in the house, or barns, or cowhouse, or stable . . . but I was made to pour out my soul to God."<sup>48</sup> Still, many nonconformist women chose the chores of their father's house to marriage. The Fenstanton church passed a resolution that adult single women could not remain at home, but must go into service.<sup>49</sup> Beaumont's life as a single woman depended on her father's good favor; his determination to disinherit her because of her disobedience made her vulnerable.

So what kinds of conclusions can be drawn from a study of Beaumont's experience? Beaumont's religious convictions filled her with a strength of spirit that allowed her to transcend existing gendered conventions. She became a part of a new community, so her spirituality did not provide her with absolute freedom. The separatist churches continued to govern the lives of the female members, in the place of traditional institutions of authority. Yet, the same restrictions that were placed on the women of these congregations were also placed on the men. Beaumont's vivid personal defense shows the growing sense of confidence and self-worth of a nonconformist woman. This new sense of self definitely challenged existing controls while paving the way for changing gender roles in the future.

### Endnotes

1. Tamsin Spargo, "Contra-dictions: Women as Figures of Exclusion and Resistance in John Bunyan and Agnes Beaumont's Narratives" in Kate Chedgzoy, ed., *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing* (Keele, Staffordshire: Keele University Press, 1996), 174.
2. Kathleen Lynch, "Her Name Agnes: The Verifications of Agnes Beaumont's Narrative Ventures," *English Literary History* 67 (Spring 2000): 74.
3. Alan Kreider and Jane Shaw, eds., *Culture and the Nonconformist Tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 2, 8-10.
4. Egerton MSS 2414, 2r.
5. F. G. Emmison, ed., *Bedfordshire Parish Registers* (Bedford: County Record Office, 1931), E5-E12.
6. H. G. Tibbutt, ed., *The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting 1650-1821* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928), 6. Hereafter referred to as *Bunyan Records*.
7. Egerton MSS 2414, 7v.
8. N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 222.
9. Egerton MSS 2414, 8r.
10. The Introduction to the *Bedfordshire Parish Records* actually points out this "unfortunate incident involving Bunyan's reputation, which [raised] little Edworth to notoriety." See Emmison, ed., *Bedfordshire Parish Registers*, Ei.
11. Egerton MSS 2414, 10v.
12. Egerton MSS 2414, 10v.
13. Roger Thompson, *Women in Stuart England and America: A Comparative Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 12.
14. Dorothy P. Ludlow, "Shaking Patriarchy's Foundation: Sectarian Women in England 1641-1700" in Richard L. Greaves, ed., *Triumph over Silence: Women in Protestant History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 108.
15. Edward Terrill, *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640-1687*. Edited by Roger Hayden (Gateshead: Northumberland Press, 1974), 213. Hereafter referred to as *Broadmead Records*.

16. Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 57.
17. Lynch, "Verifications," 73.
18. H. G. Tibbutt, *Bunyan Meeting, Bedford: 1650-1950* (Bedford: Trustees of the Bunyan Meeting, 1950), 21.
19. Egerton MSS 2414, 5r.
20. *Bunyan Records*, vi
21. H. G. Tibbutt, *Stevington Baptist Meeting 1655-1955* (Bedford: Rush and Warwick Press, 1955), 5.
22. Robert L. Child and C. E. Shipley, *Broadmead Origins: An Account of the Rise of Puritanism in England and of the Early Days of Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1940), 38-40.
23. *Broadmead Records*, 117.
24. Edward Underhill, ed., *The Records of the Churches of Christ Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham, 1644-1720* (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), 110-144, 213-230 *passim*.
25. The Broadmead church records comment on this stating, "that [the] Church might be cleansed, and not bee partakers of sinn and wickedness to provoke [the] Lord." *Broadmead Records*, 214.
26. *Bunyan Records*, viii.
27. *Bunyan Records*, 33.
28. *Bunyan Records*, 33.
29. Margaret Spufford, "The Importance of Religion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in Margaret Spufford, ed., *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520-1725* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 90.
30. It is unclear whether she was excommunicated for begging or for defaulting on the loans. *Broadmead Records*, 215-17.
31. *Bunyan Records*, x.
32. *Bunyan Records*, xi.

33. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth- Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 527-28.
34. J. A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Slander in Early Modern England: The Church Courts as York 58* (Leicester: Borthwick Papers, 1985), 20-22.
35. Egerton MSS 2414, 5v.
36. Egerton MSS 2414, 25v.
37. Tibbutt, *Bunyan Meeting*, 159.
38. Egerton MSS 2414, 17r.
39. Egerton MSS 2414, 21v.
40. Emmison, ed., *Bedfordshire Parish Records*, Ei.
41. Spufford, "The Importance of Religion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," 76.
42. Egerton MSS 2414, 10v.
43. *Bunyan Records*, 85.
44. *Bunyan Records*, xi.
45. *Bunyan Records*, x.
46. *Bunyan Records*, xi.
47. Egerton MSS 2414, 10r.
48. Egerton MSS 2414, 5r.
49. Egerton MSS 2414, 17r.

## ABSTRACT

### Agnes Beaumont (1652-172): Personal Narratives and the Nonconformist Tradition

The Beaumonts were a prosperous farming family in Edworth, a small village in Bedfordshire. Beaumont was the youngest daughter and when her mother died she took over the management of her father's household. In 1674 she was 24 years old and unmarried, though she had received several proposals. Her father had allowed her to reject these proposals, probably because he wanted her to remain at home and continue to take care of him. She had several siblings; the Edworth parish register records the baptisms of five siblings including Thomas, Mary, William, Elizabeth, and John.

Beaumont became a member of Bunyan's church in Bedford in November 1672, just over a year before her father's death in February 1674. That February, her father John Beaumont forbid her attendance at a meeting in Gamlingay, one of the congregations of Bunyan's church. She readily admits her father's reluctance to allow her attendance at this meeting, praying that "God would please to make way for my going and make my father willing, who would sometimes be against my going."<sup>1</sup> Her brother John and his wife were going to the meeting, but there of course was no room for her on the horse they were riding. When Bunyan rode through the village that afternoon, however, the younger John Beaumont persuaded him to take his sister up behind him, and she rode behind him to the church meeting. When she returned home that night, this time riding with a female neighbor, she found the house locked tight, and despite her pounding on the door her father would not let her in. She spent the cold February night in the barn.

Only after promising not to return to Bunyan's church was she allowed back into her home a few days later. Late one evening, her father became very ill and died before morning. His symptoms were so mysterious that the doctor could not explain his death. A neighbor accused Beaumont of poisoning her father because of his threat to disinherit her. As a criminal suspect she was charged both with poisoning her father, of murder, and of witchcraft through treason. Yet when the coroner called a special inquest with witnesses and jury she was cleared.

Agnes Beaumont's account of her experience forms the basis of *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont*, a classic nonconformist text. This work has now been recognized as an important work within the nonconformist tradition because it provides a first-person account of one woman's spiritual experience in the midst of religious and personal persecution. For the most part, it has been treated as a piece of literature, as an example of the type of devotional tracts that include John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, unique because it was penned by a woman and printed as a testament to feminine religious commitment.

Beaumont herself becomes a hero in the story. In writing a biography of Beaumont, however, one begins to ponder the objectivity of her personal narrative. The historical validity of the personal narrative must be understood within the context of the nonconformist tradition. Beaumont's account is not just important because of its status as a primary source. Rather, it is important because it describes the motivations and goals of nonconformist women in the late seventeenth century.

This paper would first discuss Beaumont's *Narrative* in detail, dividing it into three parts and examining each part in reference to the types of information it reveals. It would then examine the work of other nonconformist women, including Dorothy Hazzard of the

Broadmead Baptist Church and the writings of the Quaker minister Margaret Fell in an attempt to determine the similarities and differences between their stories. Finally, the paper would draw conclusions about what can be understood about the feminine nonconformist experience in an attempt to understand not only the role of women in these churches, but in greater society as well.

1. Camden, ed., *The Narrative*, 41.