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Re-Writing Silence:

The Visibility of the Female Experience in Mary Sidney's *Psalms*

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many scholars have tasked themselves with looking more closely and critically at the profound roles women have played in shaping culture throughout history. In spite of the fact that women's contributions have often been overshadowed by those of men, women's academic and artistic endeavours have nevertheless historically influenced the developing societies around them in pivotal ways. The goal of uncovering the social as well as political implications of women's works alongside those of men's works, as years wear on, therefore becomes more pressing; to do otherwise risks their being forever denied their rightful place in our literary canon. In light of such efforts at recognition, this paper considers how the literary patroness Mary Sidney Herbert remains relatively neglected as a focus of study; for many years, her own substantial professional achievement in translating and writing have been overshadowed by her brother, the widely-celebrated Philip Sidney. More recent investigations, however, into early-modern women's persistent participation in the social sphere have illuminated that, of the two siblings, Mary Sidney may even deserve more attention and regard. Following Philip's death, for example, Mary Sidney worked to ensure the preservation of the family name and the wide distribution of her brother's works, including their co-authored translations of the Biblical psalms. She recognized that this project in particular held the potential to distinguish her own name as a

writer: with the wide recognition and legitimacy the Psalter afforded her, she advanced her career as an exceptional female Renaissance writer. This paper, though limited in its scope by studying only a small portion of the Sidney Psalter, makes the claim that Mary Sidney's completion of the project and the evolution of her career demonstrate both her refusal of the expected passive role for early-modern women and her claim to agency as an ambitious writer.

Although translations — and, by extension, their translators — were greatly assumed by onlookers of the time as well as many critics in the years to follow to be subordinate to the authority of their source text and writer, more recent scholars have found otherwise (Goodrich 109). Explorations into Mary Sidney's translations of the Psalms, for example, have revealed the possibility that what she set out to accomplish in the project extended far beyond simply picking up where her brother left off, for the preservation of his name and reputation. Philip Sidney's original project relied on its loyalty to his source text, further legitimizing his own loyalist commentary on sixteenth century Britain. Mary Sidney's translations and re-workings of the Biblical Psalms, in contrast, assign a religious and social merit to a distinctly feminine voice and the experiences of womanhood — particularly when her re-workings invoke a connection of pregnancy and childbirth with God's creation of life. In drawing such connections, Mary Sidney calls for a legitimate recognition of the active role that early-modern women such as herself played in influencing and effectively shaping the future of their societies. Mary Sidney Herbert's completion and distribution of the Sidney Psalter carved out a space to claim personal social agency as a writer, and further, paved a pathway for her contemporary women writers to advance their own careers.

Initially, Mary Sidney¹ opted to preserve the Psalter in its manuscript form rather than submitting it for the wider-reaching option of print publication, as she had previously done for various other posthumous works of her brother's (Hannay 9). To the Patroness Sidney's contemporaries, her reasons for keeping the Psalter closer to "home" were likely perceived as being gender-based — that is, to maintain feminine modesty and chastity. More recent scholarship, however, questions the assumption that preserving her conventionally feminine image was the only reason Mary Sidney preserved the Psalter's manuscript form (Hannay 10). Even for Mary Sidney, a well-educated woman with strong familial connections, overcoming the obstacles facing women and claiming social agency—accessing the same level of education enjoyed by men, speaking publicly about their passions, and, especially, pursuing writing as a career—were lifelong struggles. Women's abilities to articulate their identities on their own terms were at endless odds with the strict societal expectations and limitations placed on their gender. Recognizing this challenge, the Patroness Sidney may have sought to maintain a degree of control over the Psalter and the power it held to make or break her ambitions in pursuing writing. By choosing an initially smaller-scale distribution for the Psalter, Mary Sidney was also able to ensure her own control in constructing her identity as a female writer, guarding her name and curating her voice under the guise of modesty.

Stereotypically, translation was assumed to be a "purely domestic" genre of writing, falling well within the bounds of women's acceptable endeavours (Belle 8). Society viewed translation, like a women's limited education, as serving a *private* rather than a public good, elevating women's "value as [a] marriageable commodity" (Bennett 4) without allowing their

¹Moving forward in this paper, in order to distinguish between the Sidney siblings, Mary will be referred to either by her full unmarried name Mary Sidney or as the Patroness Sidney, so as to not detract from or diminish the personal nature of her success and literary achievements.

personality and voice to overpower the authority of the (usually male-authored) source. Mary Sidney's completion of the Psalms, on the surface, appears to fall in line with this viewpoint. Working from a religious text further implied a degree of feminine modesty and piety—a decision that suggests the care she took not to raise alarms by stepping too far beyond acceptable topics for women to think and speak about. However, Beilin suggests that Mary Sidney's task of editing Philip's works and of translating were far from fully satisfying her desire for a creative outlet: "her religious devotion drove her to find her own poetic voice ... [h]er upbringing and her social position encouraged her to advance the Reformers' cause; her sex modified what she would do; her woman's training what she could do" (127). Through her re-workings of the Psalms, Mary Sidney maintains an unapologetically passionate and emotional perspective; by making productive use of the supposedly feminine images of caregiving, motherhood, and childbirth, she maintains the image of being carefully hemmed in socially-imposed gendered boundaries. The precise way she goes about the project, however, simultaneously offers credibility to the distinct female experience she explores and, further, seeks to lend social legitimacy to *her* name and voice as both woman and writer.

Mary Sidney's renditions of the Psalms appear more passionate and emotionally-charged than the 1599 Geneva Bible (GNV) she would likely have been most familiar with. Such a reading falls in line with stereotypical perspectives of women's "inferior" nature—a nature in contrast to men's rational and powerful manner. Clarke notes that this stereotype, with its roots extending as far back as the Biblical fall of Adam and Eve, was a pervasive and undercutting image negatively perpetuated in the early-modern period, ingrained in culture through its repetition in male-authored advice pamphlets and books which outlined "proper" gender conduct (263). Female writers of the time, however, sought to "redress this imbalance in [women's]

representation” throughout society (264), and Mary Sidney’s work with the Psalms demonstrate this aim. The rhyme scheme she introduces into “Psalm 52,” for example, adds a degree of emphasis to her words, notable even from a comparison to the first stanza from the Geneva

Bible:

GNV:

Why boastest thou thyself in thy wickedness, *O man of power?* the loving-kindness of
God *endureth daily*. (Psalm 52:1-2; emphasis added)

Mary Sidney:

Tyrant, why swell’st thou thus,
Of mischief vaunting
Since *help from God to us*
Is *never wanting*. (l. 1-4)

Although the two essentially relay the same message, the Patroness Sidney’s rhymes and line breaks suggest a passionate intention behind each line and compel her readers from one statement to the next. A contemporary of the Sidneys, John Donne, tellingly wrote of their Psalter in his poem *Upon the Translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke His Sister*: “Both told us what, and taught us how to do./ They show us islanders our Joy, our King;/ They tell us why, and teach us how to sing” (l. 20-22). As Donne’s reading suggests, Mary Sidney’s rewrite arguably improves upon the understanding and reception of God’s Scripture for its audience, encouraging greater engagement and interest in the text’s message.

Form, however, is not the only way that Mary Sidney portrays passion in her version. Her use of the word “tyrant” more powerfully conveys a certain degree of injustice and absoluteness

not achieved by the original phrase “man of power”; her decision to begin the line with this word also suggests a directness, investing the speaker — and therefore the reader — more personally in the accusation. The closeness conveyed among the psalmist, the reader, and God is further emphasized in the stanza’s second half, invoked by the claim that God’s help is something willingly given “to us” rather than being an objective “loving-kindness” that simply “endureth,” as if it exists around us in the abstract. In the next stanza, the Patroness Sidney also repetitively uses the word “lies,” highlighting the danger associated with power for its tendency toward exploitation and abuse (l. 5-8).

The personal investment and passion evident in Mary Sidney’s “Psalm 52” introduce a more heavy-handed emotionality, identifying it with a more (at least stereotypically) feminine perspective. It criticizes self-righteous power—the power in society, as she herself experienced it, held by men over women—for the way that power causes one to “swell’st”—losing sight of truth and goodness out of preference for vice and one’s own self-interest (l. 9-12). This critical diction intimates that the peaceful, virtuous, giving nature associated with femininity may be better suited to serving and promoting God’s will and purpose. The Patroness Sidney later demonstrates this privileging of the feminine by extending the symbol of the “nourish[ing roots]” (l. 31) of an olive tree acting in the service of “God’s house” (l. 30) to a mother providing nourishment and care to her own home and family; through the speaker’s identification with this image, Mary Sidney claims the distinguished importance of the female experience. The image of women as caregiver plays into the assumption of feminine domesticity, but it also extends past the confines of the home and into public life when she mirrors women’s traditional roles with God’s role as *humanity’s* chief caregiver. Throughout her re-working of “Psalm 52,” Mary Sidney does not simply suggest the belief that women should be *allowed* a place in public life,

but suggests instead that women's social engagement and thus their influence is indisputably already there, running through the very divine roots and veins of society.

The creative license the Patroness Sidney takes in her Psalms demonstrates that her act of translation was far from a "merely derivative," literal, or passive form of writing (Greenblatt & Abrams 604). Effectively, she "took advantage of the [source's] authority ... ben[ding her] source material to [her] own purposes [to] suggest new paradigms for thinking" (Goodrich 109); as a result, she proved that in spite of the limited education girls were offered in the early-modern period, she, like many of her female contemporaries, had "learned the tropes, figures and conventions of rhetoric...so well they became second nature" (Bennett 10). By first establishing the legitimacy of the female experience and voice within a strictly religious perspective, she further strengthened the foundation she created for herself as a writer, reaffirming her claim for legitimacy to be given to women's involvement in the shaping of culture.

Mary Sidney continues throughout her Psalms to legitimize women's perspectives and to identify them with God's favour; some of the most powerful connections she draws occur in her "Psalm 139." While both the Geneva translation and Mary Sidney's re-write depict the relationship between humanity and the divine, in the latter, the psalmist's personal and emotional closeness with God is emphasized. Rather than simply being "known" and understood by the omniscient God as the Geneva translation implies (Psalm 139: 1), the "closest closet" of the speaker's mind in the Patroness Sidney's psalm is figuratively transparent in God's eyes, which portrays His seeming intimate understanding of women's closest-kept desires, needs, beliefs, and aims (l. 6). The Biblical psalmist relates that God knows one's "sitting and [one's] rising ... [one's] paths, and [one's] lying down" (Psalm 139: 2-3)—a knowledge that ultimately portrays God's steadfast presence in individuals' lives. But, Mary Sidney's psalmist takes this notion one

step further in her translation: “When to my bed for rest I go, / I find thee there, / And everywhere” (l. 9-11). The image of one’s bed demonstrates an undeniable intimacy between the speaker and the Divine, and it does so by situating both the speaker and God firmly in the traditionally feminine domestic space. The Patroness Sidney’s rendition additionally has the speaker not only surrender their “reins”—their actions and words—to God’s use as the Geneva Bible does, but also entrust Him with “each inmost piece” (l. 43) of their very being. For early-modern women, so often barred from public speech and debate, turning inward was one of the only ways they could negotiate and understand their own identities and beliefs at the most basic and personal level (Larson 23-24). Moreover, in the Sidney siblings’ lifetimes, “poetry was thought to offer the most efficacious means of articulating what might otherwise be inexpressible” (Bennett 11); so, poetry inevitably represents an obvious outlet to express this inward turning—an inward turning that was not a weakness then but a means to effectively participate in writing culture. By depicting her speaker as giving *everything* she is up to God, Mary Sidney continues to claim women’s equal ability with men’s to serve God’s will within His kingdom, and therefore in their public society.

Most powerfully of all, in “Psalm 139” the Patroness Sidney affirms the absoluteness of God’s closeness with and trust of women by making a connection between the image of childbirth and the divine creation of life. Women’s confinement to the domestic, during the Renaissance and moving forward, was often assumed to be justified by the belief that the importance of their roles as mothers should not or even *could* not be overridden by any amount of desire for a more public role (Bennett 4); as a result, women had to fight for recognition and legitimacy in the public sphere, as Sidney did through her writing. By drawing this connection, between “poetry and divine truth, and the role of the pious female poet” (Beilin 122), Mary

Sidney continues in her method of accepting the traditional expectations placed on women; however, she simultaneously questions the assumption that those conventional roles do not—and cannot—combine with women’s ability to influence their wider societies. The Geneva translation places the power of creation solely in God’s hands, depriving women of agency and implicating their bodies simply as a type of incubator or empty vessel intended only for His use: “*thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb ... marvelous are thy works ... Thine eyes did see me, when I was without form:/ for in thy book were all things written*” (Psalm 139: 13-16; emphasis added). The Patroness Sidney’s version of “Psalm 139” likewise includes the first-person perspective, but layers on a more corporeal element that makes the imagery feel nearly palpable. Through this depiction, she rejects women’s passivity and instead asserts the direct and active role that women play in the creation of life:

Thou, how *my back* was beam-wise laid,
 And *raft’ring of my ribs*, dost know;
 Know’st every point
 Of *bone and joint*,
 How to this whole these parts did grow,
 In brave embroid’ry fair arrayed,
 Though *wrought in shop both dark and low*. (l. 50-56; emphasis added)

Although still acknowledging that God holds ultimate authority in creation, “with times appointed ... in the book / Of thy foresight” (l. 61-63), Mary Sidney also demonstrates the way that He not only uses women’s bodies for creation but *entrusts* them with it and even blesses women with the greater, subsequent responsibility of raising, and effectively shaping, the future generation of humanity. Akin to God’s own knowledge, for example, women carry an intimate

knowledge of "every point / Of bone and joint" of the new life they are entrusted with bringing into existence and caring for.

In this bold proclamation, Mary Sidney makes a powerful claim for the recognition and legitimization of women's influential social roles, one difficult to dispute. As she suggests through her re-writes of the Psalms, the men of her society held no true justification to restrict women's place and ignore the influence women had on the very future of their culture; this influence, as she reveals throughout her rendition of the Psalms, was something granted to women by the trust God places in them. Whether their male contemporaries liked it or not, women's influence was undoubtedly, pervasively, and irreversibly present, grounded in even the most basic and conventional expectations of social life. However, Mary Sidney's assertion extends beyond simply recognizing women's domestic roles as mothers and applies to the fight she involved herself in as a female writer—the fight to have her name known and her voice publicly heard and for both to be recognized for their equal value with the names and voices of men. Through these efforts, she contributed to paving the pathway forward for the close and distant future generations of women writers. Her claims for voice and recognition did not put an end to the fight, of course—in many ways, women still continue today to battle very similar obstacles the Patroness Sidney herself faced—but they built part of the foundation that contemporary women continue to work from; the value in this cannot be understated.

As a critical consideration of Mary Sidney's Psalms demonstrates, women's contributions to their societies have carried powerful implications in spite of the odds facing them. Taking that extra stride and locating the evidence and impacts of those efforts, as contemporary historians and literary academics have begun to do, offers a bountiful collection of insights that have been previously—and sometimes purposely—neglected. Mary Sidney's re-

working of the Psalms, through various images associated with womanhood, seeks to bring legitimacy to women's experiences in the confinement to domestic, private life, but also to convey the fundamental importance of those experiences in the development of the social culture and the wider public sphere. This assertion stakes another claim for the place of women's participation in their societies, and effectively carves out a space for women to curate and cultivate their voices, most especially through the active efforts of both speaking and writing.

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