

# Pleasurable Spaces: The Re-Writing of Women's Theological Experience in Mary Sidney's *Psalmes*

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Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women  
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*Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), was educated within the literary Sidney circle and became one of the leading patrons of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Her home at Wilton was a favorite gathering place for writers like Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton. She was also an accomplished writer, producing translations, a pastoral, dedicatory poems, and an elegy for her brother, Sir Philip Sidney. The Psalm translations that are the focus of this paper and which her brother began were completed in the years after Sir Philip Sidney's death in 1586. She contributed 107 of the 150 psalms. Widely circulated in manuscript, the Sidney Psalms influenced the writings of poets like John Donne and George Herbert. In this paper, I build on a range of recent scholarship examining the strategies whereby Pembroke builds a distinctly female voice into her translations. In particular, I focus on images of pleasure and intimacy, arguing that the Psalms become a protected space within which Pembroke can assert her agency as a writer sanctioned by God.*

In her recent study, *Subjectivity and Women's Poetry in Early Modern England*, Lynette McGrath posits two strategies of resistance that enabled an early modern female writer to develop her authorial voice. First, women who confined their writing within religious, and therefore ostensibly virtuous, bounds, could engage in what she calls a "subversively exaggerated 'enactment' of both ideological demands and literary conventions," or subversive mimesis (McGrath 21). Second, female communities isolated from male control could function as secure spaces within which women could speak and act as agents. Central to both of these strategies is the idea of a protected space that paradoxically authorizes and enables female articulation. Mary Sidney draws on both strategies in her Psalm translations. Writing within the genre of religious poetry, she positions herself as the virtuous and divinely inspired exegete of godly experience.

Sidney makes use of this generic space to explore the intimacy of her relationship with God and the pleasure of poetic agency. Moreover, throughout her translations, Sidney envisages herself as part of a divinely sanctioned community -- in particular a community of wise warrior maids, women prepared to voice their song throughout the world. Any discussion of early modern authorial agency is necessarily complicated by the unstable and fluid nature of subjectivity and textual production in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. However, Sidney's reworking of her biblical sources operates strategically, as she foregrounds the validity and divinity of female pleasure, learning, and poetic output. In so doing, she reclaims the speaking, flowing, desiring woman that posed such a threat in the early modern period as God's intimate and as God's poet.

The specific generic choice of the Psalms, of course, provides Sidney with a narrative space that is at once political and didactic and that allows for the possibility of authorial security, pleasure, and freedom. In choosing to complete her brother's project after his death, Sidney knowingly chooses a genre used in the early modern period as a medium for expressing the plight of the (Protestant) faithful suffering under (Catholic) tyranny, a genre that Philip Sidney lauds for its didactic potency and its capacity, through original writing, to instill absolute learning and pleasure. Veiled behind the "nested voices," as Margaret Hannay calls them, of God, David, and translator that merge in the Psalms' first-person narrator, the translator has vast scope for original commentary (Hannay, "House-Confined" 48). Sidney characterizes this space first and foremost in terms of safety, a sphere protected by God within which she can develop her poetic voice. As she declares, she "shall thee sing by thee secure"<sup>1</sup> (71:75). Taught and supported by God, the psalmist's, and by extension Sidney's, words are at once valorized and safeguarded.

Throughout the poems, Sidney inserts references to divine inspiration and support, or else refocuses references present in her source material, particularly Calvin's commentaries, Marot and de Bèze's Psalm paraphrases and commentaries, and the Geneva Bible, to highlight the development of her poetic voice. In Psalm 138, for example, Sidney insists that her entreaties to God result in a growing confidence to publicly praise: "my courage by thee mightily encreased" (12). Sidney's choice of the word "courage," gleaned from Calvin's commentaries, highlights the psalmist's agency in determining to praise God. Similarly, at the conclusion of the Psalm, Sidney reinterprets the biblical appeal to God to complete "the workes of thine hands" (138:8) as a confident declaration that God will complete the psalmist's work. Given the translation's emphasis on gaining the courage to express God's praise publicly, it is difficult not to associate this reference with literary output: "Thou lord shalt finish what in hand I have: / thou lord I say whose mercy lasteth ever, / thy work begun shall leave unended never" (22-4). Defending the Psalm as the words of both psalmist and God, the verses implicitly valorize Sidney's poetic work. Sidney imagines God as a teacher helping her to develop her authorial voice. That relationship functions as a secure and

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Sidney, *The Psalmes of David, The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon, and Michael G. Brennan, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 89. All subsequent references to Sidney's Psalms are to this edition, by Psalm and line numbers, and incorporated within the text.

private space – she characterizes it as a “clossett” in Psalms 119, 139, and 143 – within which her poetic skill matures (119P:5; 139:6; 143:41).

The metaphorical “clossett” within which Sidney relates to God stands not only as a safe space for education and growing authorial agency but also as a space that validates female pleasure, desire, and physicality. Recent criticism, particularly that of Suzanne Trill, has rightly shied away from reading Sidney’s autobiography into her translations. However, such critiques of the danger of linking a text to authorial voice do not detract from Sidney’s insistence throughout the *Psalms* that a woman’s experience can represent the experience of all believers and that images gleaned from the perspective of a sixteenth-century aristocratic woman can function as a valid means of depicting the relationship between human and divine. Anticipating twentieth-century feminist theologians, she explores the myriad ways in which the (female) psalmist can perceive and relate to God. The Psalms in themselves provide a rich array of divine images; God appears as redeemer, as shepherd, as protector, as king. However, in her translations Sidney draws out more unconventional ways of compassing God. God appears in her translations as a lover, a teacher, a source of liberation. In Psalm 74, God appears as a midwife figure – though still a king -- guiding the psalmist through the labor of sin to the release of grace:

Thou art my god, I know,  
    my king, who long ago  
did’st undertake the chardg of me:  
    and in my hard distresse  
    did’st work me such release,  
that all the world did wondring see. (74:61-6)

Sidney elaborates on the image of God working on salvation in the depths of the earth for five lines.

Contemporary theologian Sallie McFague reminds us that no single metaphor can ever perfectly “fit the unknowability of God” (139). All images are approximations. As a result, all metaphors, whether abstract or gendered, provide equally valid – and highly personal – means of approaching God. Individuals choose images that foster intimacy with God in their own terms, envisioning God as mother, music, sky, brother, or, as in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, “liking what you like” (103). This theory creates space for images of physical intimacy, female desire, and female pleasure. Most important, it identifies such characteristics as divine. As a result, such intimacy brings with it the possibility of agency. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argues: “Throughout Christian history, women discovered this concept of direct relation to God as a way to affirm their own authority and autonomy against patriarchal authority” (157). Images for divine relationship that grow out of personal experience become the basis for “transformative” acts in religion and in society as a whole largely because those experiences become validated by being associated with God (160). Sidney’s decision to explore the facets of her relationship with God within an inherently political genre functions in many ways as a fledgling feminist theology, widening the ways through which believers can perceive God.

Sidney places original emphasis on the pleasure and desire central to a relationship with God and to the act of praising the divine. The search for God's presence appears as a pleasurable, even erotic experience, as the psalmist thirsts for union with the divine. In Psalm 84, for example, Sidney writes:

My soule doth long, and pine with longing.  
unto the god that liveth  
[ . . . . . ]  
my hart and body doth aspire,  
above delight, beyond desire. (84:4-8)

The translation draws on the physical yearning alluded to in Calvin's commentaries and in Marot and de Bèze's Psalm paraphrases. Calvin, for instance, states that, "in the second verse is expressed more than an ordinarie maner of longing" (34v). Indeed, Sidney portrays the psalmist's thirsty longing for God as both a spiritual and a physical encounter with God's fluid grace: "how is for thee my spirit thirsty dry! / how gaspes my flesh for thy refreshing taste!" (63:3-4). Her God is a "Fountaine of pittie" (56:1) out of whome "mercies streames [ . . . ] flow" (51:25) and whose "faces beames / from heav'n uppon us show'r / in shining streames" (67:3-5). None of these images of overflowing and fluid divinity safely adhere to Sidney's ostensible defense of her Psalms as dutiful acts of so-called "seemly pleasure" (147:3).

Psalm 86 makes this intimate relationship with God more explicit as Sidney depicts God as a lover. The Geneva translation presents the psalmist receiving a "token of [God's] goodnes" (86:17). Sidney rewrites the scene with a love token:

O lett some token of thy love  
be eminently on me placed;  
some Cognisance, to teach and prove,  
that thine I am, that by thee graced. (86:41-4)

The intimate context of the passage lends the term "graced" connotations not only of divine privilege but also of physical pleasure. Such puns on "grace" were not uncommon in the late sixteenth century. For example, in Sonnet LXXIII in *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* (1593), Barnabe Barnes puns on grace as divine favor, sexual favor, and physical beauty: "Why did rich nature graces graunt to thee, / since thou art such a niggard of thy grace?"<sup>2</sup> Moreover, fifteen years after the completion of Sidney's *Psalmes*, Amelia Lanyer makes erotic grace a central component of her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, a poem very much influenced by Sidney, as her Christ literally flows with grace that is accessible to women. The possibility of female physical pleasure and intimacy becomes sanctioned by and even shared with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Barnabe Barnes, "Sonnet *lxxiii*," *Parthenophil and Parthenophe: A Critical Edition*, ed. Victor A. Doyno (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Oress, 1971) 43-4.

Sidney further bolsters this claim to poetic authority by placing herself in the midst of a godly community authorized and commanded by God to sing. In Psalm 68, this community is explicitly female. The women in the Psalm appear in Sidney's translation as part of an army of virgins who, taught and inspired by God, exercise their poetic voices after the kings have abandoned the battle. Drawing on de Bèze's commentary and paraphrase, Sidney structures this portion of the Psalm as the women's song:

Ther taught by thee in this tryumphant song  
a virgin army did their voices try:  
fledd are these kings, fledd are these armyes strong:  
we share the spoiles that weake in howse did ly.  
though late the Chymney made your beauties loathed,  
now shine you shall, and shine more gracefully,  
then lovely dove in cleare gold-silver cloathed,  
that glides with feathered Oare through wavy sky. (25-32)

Sidney explicitly extends the experience of individual poetic maturation to all women. In a 1994 article, Margaret Hannay compares this later version of the translation with an earlier manuscript variant.<sup>3</sup> In the earlier version, Sidney audaciously uses the first person "we" throughout the section, uniting herself with the community of militant maidens. Moreover, in the variant Sidney actually transforms the women into birds flying above their oppressors, dazzling gazes below and preventing (male) observers from accurately describing, defining, or confining them. Sidney writes, "Since now as late enlarged doves wee freer skyes do try" (Variant, MSS B, I, 36).

Sidney's decision to push beyond her sources' emphasis on the beauty of the dove's plumage to highlight the freedom of bird's flight in both versions of Psalm 68 becomes especially significant given her insistence throughout her translations on the physical freedom she enjoys through relationship with God. In her dedicatory poem to Elizabeth I, Sidney seemingly deprecates her poetic capacity: "Thy pitch is earthly lowe / forbear this heav'n, where onely Eagles flie" (79-80). Yet, Sidney consistently imagines herself among those eagles. She envisions God as a "lord of skies" (93:12) and yearns to explore that space: "O what is he will teach me clyme the skies?" (73:73). Validating her poetic voice, her relationship with God "sett[s] [her] free" (54:13) and Sidney describes herself in Psalm 54 as having the "scope to soare with happie flight / above my evils: and on my enemy / making me see, what I to see delight" (54:13-16). The trite metaphor of poetic flight becomes in Sidney's *Psalmes* the quintessential space for divine authorial pleasure and physical freedom. By extending such scope to the virgin army in Psalm 68, Sidney not only grants her female community pleasure and poetic agency, but also liberates them; Margaret Hannay aptly notes that the Psalm stands as one of Sidney's most political ("House-Confined" 69, 71).

Sidney's insistence on identifying with a community of maidens in Psalm 68 points towards the work of feminist theologians like Judith Plaskow, who argues that the

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<sup>3</sup> The variant text appears in Mary Sidney, *The Psalmes of David* 268-72.

development of a “collective memory” in community through story or song stands as a central element of women’s work in redefining their relationship with God (44). Indeed, Sidney consistently presents herself as a leader and teacher of the godly, teaching not only women, but all believers, how to sing. The *Psalms* foreground Sidney’s politically loaded insistence that she will teach God’s word abroad and, daringly, derive pleasure from that experience: “And I secure shall spend my happie tymes / in my, though lowly, never-dying rymes, / singing with praise the god that Jacob loveth” (75:25-7). Foregrounding first-person pronouns, Sidney insists that she will not only teach the godly how to praise, but will join in the song herself:

Both they and I will tell and sing  
how forcfull thou, and fearefull art:  
yea both will willing wittnes bring  
and unto comming tymes impart  
thy greatnes, goodnes, just desert:  
that all who are, or are to be,  
this Hymne with joy shall sing to thee. (145:15-21)

The Geneva translation also alludes to the psalmist teaching and participating in praise, but the strategic positioning and repetition of “Both they and I,” the elaboration of the promise to praise God, and the insistence on “this Hymne” are Sidney’s. The translations of Psalm 57 and Psalm 71 similarly stress her claim to her song. *Her* hymn, she argues, will be the hymn that teaches the godly to sing – and to sing with joy.

In some ways, this paper might more aptly have been entitled “Ecstatic Spaces” rather than “Pleasurable Spaces.” Etymologically, ecstasy means to stand outside of oneself, while also of course denoting ultimate delight, thereby fusing the concepts of space and pleasure which Sidney foregrounds. While “pleasure” finally accounts more satisfactorily for the physical intimacy that pervades Sidney’s translations, “ecstasy” points to Sidney’s quest for a transcendent space beyond the sphere normally reserved for the early modern woman, a space within which female pleasure and voice become not only authoritative, but even divine. Whether characterized in terms of the protection offered by her generic choice of religious translation, as the intimate “clossett” within which her poetic voice matures, as the godly community through which she authorizes other women to sing, or as the freedom experienced through bird’s flight, this space enables Sidney to explore the facets of her relationship with God in her own terms, while also infusing such personal meditation with profoundly political implications.

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