

# MARY SIDNEY'S PSALMS AND THE USES OF HISTORY

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Beginning with an account of Andrew Marvell's poem "Bermudas" this lecture explores the ways in which the historicizing of texts can enlarge our experience of them or, conversely, reduce it. My main focus is on the Psalms of Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. My question is to consider how we should read these texts: as part of a Protestant or gender polemic or as poems generated by an essentially lyric impulse, setting them out of time. The key text which I analyse is her version of Psalm 52.

Andrew Marvell's 'Bermudas' is a poem steeped in history. In fact, it is a consciously historical poem, a reconstruction, some thirty years later of an event which happened in the 1620s.<sup>1</sup> This, in itself, is an interesting phenomenon for it is not common to find a lyric poem used in such a way, history being more commonly the substance of narrative. The poem becomes even more interesting when we consider why so historically aware a figure as Marvell should have written so simple, even naïve, a poem —and we may see that a key to it lies in the role a poetic genre played in the emergence of early modern English culture:

Where the remote Bermudas ride  
In the ocean's bosom unespied,  
From a small boat, that rowed along,  
The listening winds received this song.  
    "What should we do but sing his praise  
That led us through the watery maze,  
Unto an isle so long unknown,  
And yet far kinder than our own?  
Where he the huge sea-monsters wracks,  
That lift the deep upon their backs,  
He lands us on a grassy stage,  
Safe from the storms, and prelate's rage.  
He gave us this eternal spring,  
Which here enamels everything,

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<sup>1</sup>The poem is probably based on the experiences of John Oxenbridge, in whose house Marvell lodged in the mid 1650s. Oxenbridge had made two trips to the Bermudas in the 1630s to escape Laudian persecution. See Donno 1972: 266.

And sends the fowls to us in care,  
 On daily visits through the air.  
 He hangs in shades the orange bright,  
 Like golden lamps in a green night,  
 And does in the pom'granates close  
 Jewels more rich than Ormus shows.  
 He makes the figs our mouths to meet,  
 And throws the melons at our feet,  
 But apples plants of such a price,  
 No tree could ever bear them twice.  
 With cedars, chosen by his hand,  
 From Lebanon, he stores the land,  
 And makes the hollow seas, that roar,  
 Proclaim the ambergris on shore.  
 He cast (of which we rather boast)  
 The gospel's pearl upon our coast,  
 And in these rocks for us did frame  
 A temple, where to sound his name.  
 Oh let our voice his praise exalt,  
 Till it arrive at heaven's vault:  
 Which thence (perhaps) rebounding, may  
 Echo beyond the Mexique Bay."  
 Thus sung they, in the English boat,  
 An holy and a cheerful note,  
 And all the way, to guide their chime,  
 With falling oars they kept the time. (Marvell, 116-17)

The poem fits well into Marvell's general concern with liminal states or experiences, as in "Little TC in a Prospect of Flowers" or "Young Love," poems which explore the transition from childhood to maturity. In the case of "Bermudas" it is not an individual but a state whose transition is explored, the poem fixing on a moment central to the founding Puritan experience of exile to the Americas. The nation building which they embarked on there, which is the subject of the hopes and prophecies which the people in the boat sing about, is now, at the time of Marvell's writing, very relevant to the land they left since a new English state is being constructed by the same people, or at least their fellow travellers. In short, the poem is an observation, by way of the "frame" of the first four lines and the last four, of what those who believe they have been chosen by Providence will do in their new found land and, by extension, of what they will now do in England.

In this case, in gauging the distance between the poet and his subjects we can use not only the historical distance between him and them but also the poem's form. Its defining feature is its primitive simplicity. It consists of rhyming octosyllabic couplets, an almost total metrical regularity, and

emphatically obvious rhymes often achieved by syntactic inversions. All of these elements make it a poor poem from the point of view of its style, a quality which is spectacularly at odds with its frequently powerful imagery.

In part the stylistic crudity can be explained by its narrative context. "Bermudas" is a rowing song whose metrical regularity marks the beating of the rowers' oars. Marvell, from everything we know about him a highly sophisticated man, is cunningly taking us into the heart of the Puritans' work ethic which is also the Puritans' art ethic. Just as the paradise of Bermuda has to be worked at, its total sufficiency where figs and fowl are provided in abundance still being insufficient for a people who want to proselytise Catholic Mexico, so art in its purest lyric form must have a function too. Here it is a double one: praise of God's abundance and the engine which drives the boat towards the shore.

In making his poem work like this Marvell is explaining not only the history of a newly potent cultural force but also the history of a genre as well, for "Bermudas," or at least the inset portion of it, reads like a metrical psalm. So much is signalled by the phrase "sing his praise," for every reader of an English Bible would know that the Psalms were the archetypal songs of praise, as the marginal note explaining the book's title "Psalms" in the Geneva Bible puts it:<sup>2</sup>

Or, praises, according to the Hebrewes: and were chiefly instituted to praise and give thanks to God for his benefits. They are called the Psalmes or songs of David, because the most part were made by him.

It is not an actual Biblical psalm, so it is not literally a translation, but it is a "taking across" of the style and content of the most popular form of sixteenth-century psalm translation. The cultural marker of the nascent Puritan movement within English Protestantism was its communal singing of Thomas Sternhold's (1638) metrical psalms rather than the version, derived from the Great Bible, which was used in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.<sup>3</sup> Chanted by multitudes throughout the second half of the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth, these "poems" were the popular art of the day, and the day lasted well into the seventeenth century, as in this example of a "Sternhold and

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<sup>2</sup>The Geneva Bible, published in the first years of Elizabeth's reign, was the Elizabethan Bible, selling some half a million copies and retaining its popularity right up to the Restoration, in part because of the Puritan orientation of its notes. The Hebrew word for psalms which is referred to here is *tehillim*, from the verb *hillel*, "praise."

<sup>3</sup>Sternhold's *Certayne Psalmes*, first published in 1549, set the pattern for the English metrical psalm. John Hopkins added seven of his own psalms to Sternhold's thirty-seven, and throughout the next hundred years "Sternhold and Hopkins" metrical psalms appeared in many varied versions often bound up in the additional material of Geneva Bibles and Authorized Versions. See Zim 1987: 124-25.

Hopkins' psalm (Psalm 47) taken from the additional material printed in the back of a 1638 Authorized Version:

Ye people all with one accord  
 clap hands and eke rejoyce:  
 Be glad and sing unto the Lord  
 with sweet and pleasant voice.  
 For high the Lord and dreadfull is,  
 with wonders manifold:  
 A mighty king he is truly,  
 in all the earth extoll'd.

The people he shall make to be  
 unto our bondage thrall:  
 And underneath our feet he shall  
 the nations make to fall.  
 For us the heritage he chose  
 which we possesse alone,  
 The flourishing worship of Jacob  
 his wellbeloved one.

Our God ascended up on high  
 with joy and pleasant noise:  
 The Lord goes up above the skie  
 with trumpets royall voice.  
 Sing praises to our God, sing praise,  
 sing praises to our King:  
 For God is King of all the earth,  
 All skillfull praises sing.

God on the heathen reignes, and sits  
 upon his holy throne:  
 The princes of the people have  
 Them joyned every one.  
 To Abrahams people for our God,  
 which is exalted high,  
 As with a buckler doth defend  
 the earth continually.

To see how these metrical psalms were used for communal and national ends we can take the accounts of Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the globe in the late 1570s. There is first the record of psalm singing as a means for Drake and his crew to purge themselves in the aftermath of the great crisis of the voyage which had culminated in the execution of Thomas Doughty, followed by the renaming of the *Pelican* as the *Golden Hind*. According to Francis Fletcher's contemporary notes,

This gracious exercise ended with prayer to God for Her Most Excellent Majesty, her honourable council and the church and the commonweal of England, with singing of psalms and giving thanks for God's great and singular graces bestowed upon us from time to time, we departed from the Bloody Island and Port Julian, setting our course for the supposed strait with three ships only. (Hampden 1972: 209)

Later in the voyage, just off San Francisco, Fletcher describes the potentially proselytising effect which the English psalms had upon the native inhabitants:

In the time of which prayers, singing of Psalms, and reading of certain chapters in the Bible, they sat very attentively: and observing the end of every pause, with one voice still cried, "Oh," greatly rejoicing in our exercises. Yea, they took such pleasure in our singing of Psalms, that whensoever they resorted to us, their first request was commonly this, "Gnaah," by which they entreated that we would sing. (179)

And of chief importance, as it was to Marvell's puritans who used their psalm to define themselves against official Anglicanism ("prelate's rage"), there was in the sixteenth century the need to define the role of militant Protestantism, as demonstrated by the behaviour of Drake and his crew when they attacked the port of Guatalco on the west coast of central America. This is John Cummins's recent account, based on contemporary Spanish sources:

The few Spaniards who could be mustered, together with a few Indians who were decorating the church for Holy Week, put up a brief resistance, but as soon as the small vessel fired her artillery most of them retreated into the woods overlooking the town and watched impotently as the English ransacked it... the church was pillaged, its plate, bell and vestments stolen, its altarpiece and crucifixes hacked to pieces, and the holy waters scattered and trampled.

The priest,... a relative of his,... and the Crown factor... were captured and taken aboard the *Golden Hinde*... The prisoners were put below deck, and Drake went ashore to oversee the plunder. On his return he ate a good meal with them... after which there was an hour-long service of prayers and psalms, sometimes accompanied by four viols. (Cummins 1995: 112)

So, in some ways Marvell's "Bermudas" is itself a meditation on the nature of art. It sets popular art against high art, the poet in his frame, using poetry for the high cultural purposes of history, reflecting coolly and with some detachment upon the picture of the people in their boat who use their art for its immediate functionality; and as part of this contrast he sets the idea of art as a private and meditative thing against the idea of art as something public and communal. He is, of course, writing just after the high point of the first great period of English lyric poetry, being the successor of Donne and Herbert as a writer of Metaphysical verse, and also feeding off those other two dominant

Renaissance English modes, the Jonsonian / Cavalier and the Spenserian / Miltonic. In all three of these modes, the Metaphysical, the Cavalier, and the Spenserian we can increasingly see the part played by the sixteenth century's fascination with the Biblical book of Psalms which underlies "Bermudas." The Psalms, many of which are set as intimate dialogues between the psalmist and his God, offered a model to the emerging English lyric for the personal, reflective, essentially introspective poetry of the Metaphysical poets. They also functioned as public poetry of praise, thereby reinforcing the development of the Jonsonian and Cavalier lyric; and in their national role, celebrating the triumphs of Israel and the defeat of its enemies, they informed Spenserian and Miltonic lyric and epic modes.

Now that we have the splendid second volume of Mary Sidney's Works we can more fully see how vital the Psalms, and in particular her Psalms were to the development of the English lyric poem.<sup>4</sup> Most obviously the influence was a matter of content. The Psalms offer a model for isolation and introspection, as Thomas Wyatt's earlier versification of the Penitential Psalms had demonstrated. Writing just after the Reformation, Wyatt was making an essentially Protestant point when, in the narrative lead up to Psalm 130, *De profundis clamavi*, he emphasised the interior rather than exterior nature of repentance.<sup>5</sup> Repentance is not a matter of acts or signs but of thoughts and the heart:

But when he weigh'th the fault and recompense,  
He damn'th his deed and findeth plain  
Atween them two no whit equivalence;  
Whereby he takes all outward deed in vain  
To bear the name of rightful penitence,  
Which is alone the heart returned again  
And sore contrite that doth his fault bemoan,  
And outward deed the sign or fruit alone. (ll. 648-55)

This move, from the exterior to the interior is a key move in Elizabethan writing, found in the secular as well as in the religious lyric, as in the opening sonnet of Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, in which the poet effectively rejects all external influences and decides to listen to his Muse who tells him to look in his heart and write.

The opening two verses of Psalm 130 in the Geneva Bible read simply, "Out of the deep places have I called unto thee, O Lord. / Lord hear my voice: let thine ears attend to the voice of my prayers." It is revealing to compare

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<sup>4</sup>All quotations from Mary Sidney's verse which follow are from Hannay (ed. 1998).

<sup>5</sup>Wyatt's narrative within which his psalm translations are set is modelled upon Pietro Aretino's *I Sette Salmi de la Penitentia di David* (1534).

Thomas Wyatt's versification with Mary Sidney's. Psalm 130 is the sixth of the seven penitential psalms; and it is observable that Wyatt's paraphrases became less wordy as the sequence developed.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Wyatt's eleven line paraphrase, marked by an insistence upon "depth," is representative of one extreme of psalm paraphrasing which recurs throughout the sixteenth century, which was to embellish and accumulate:

From depth of sin and from a deep despair,  
 From depth of death, from depth of heart's sorrow,  
 From this deep cave of darkness' deep repair,  
 Thee have I called, O Lord, to be my borrow.  
 Thou in my voice, O Lord, perceive and hear  
 My heart, my hope, my plaint, my overthrow,  
 My will to rise, and let by grant appear  
 That to my voice thine ears do well intend.  
 No place so far that to thee is not near;  
 No depth so deep that thou ne mayst extend  
 Thine ear thereto. Hear then my woeful plaint. (213-14)

Contrast this abundance with the austerity of Mary Sidney's version of the same two biblical verses, which forms the first stanza of a six stanza poem:

From depth of grief  
 Where droun'd I ly,  
 Lord for relief  
 To thee I cry:  
 my earnest, vehment, cryeng, prayeng,  
 graunt quick, attentive, heering, waighing.

It is difficult to argue against the view that Sidney's version is much the more impressive adaptation of the biblical original. While Wyatt gets his effects from repetition and from the development of the metaphor of despair as a kind of Stygian abyss, Sidney moves swiftly through the metaphor of the drowning man in the first four lines into the urgency of abstraction in adjectives and participial nouns in the final two, in which there is the sense of revising upwards, "earnest" being sharpened to "vehement" and "crying" to "praying," then "quick" being intensified to "attentive" and "hearing" to "weighing." The most striking contrast between the two English versions is in their form. Wyatt's *terza rima*, always difficult to pull off in English, underpins a stately, contemplative version of the psalm. The form is something of a dead end in English: poets continued to experiment with it after Wyatt but, as H.A. Mason observes, it is significant "that we still refer to it as *terza rima*, for all the successes in the form are Italian, where it is comparatively easy to meet the

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<sup>6</sup>See Robert Rebholz's comment that Wyatt draws away from his primary source Aretino in the later psalms "partly because of the Italian's verbosity" (1978: 454).

obligation to rhyme three times on every line-end word” (1986: 156). Reading Sidney’s version, however, we might well be reading something by a later Metaphysical poet, such as Henry Vaughan. The stanza rhymes ababcc, the first four lines each of two feet ending in strong rhymes, and the fifth and sixth each of nine syllables with weak rhymes. Neither Wyatt nor Sidney is writing anything remotely near the simple regularities of Sternhold or Marvell’s “Bermudas,” an observation which begins to reveal the wonderful malleability of the Psalms for whatever the sixteenth and seventeenth-century poets wished to do with them, but Sidney’s is the most interesting of these three ways to approach a psalm. She seldom departs far from her original text but she constantly experiments with form and structure —so much so that it may not be too fanciful to claim that in her versification of Psalms 44-150 we find the first fully developed realisation of the possibilities of the English lyric poem.

Now, it is certainly possible to find in Mary Sidney’s Psalms a variety of interests, from the point of view of gender issues or court or national politics, which might encourage us to use them principally as keys to unlock some of the essential concerns of the early modern period. But if we do so we run the risk of losing sight of her primary concern which was to make the Psalms work technically as pieces of living poetry. Her main challenge was to understand and reproduce in equivalent English forms, many of which she invented, their forms and the development of their ideas.

Consider a stanza from Psalm 65 which might seem to offer a good opportunity for a political reading. It paraphrases these two verses, given here as throughout this paper from the Geneva Bible:<sup>7</sup>

6. He establisheth the mountains by his power: and is girded about with strength.

7. He appeaseth the noise of the seas, and the noise of the waves thereof, and the tumults of the people.

In Sidney’s version there is a noticeable redirection of focus, away from the grandeur of the mountains and the restlessness of the seas towards the more human, political element of civil unrest. Indeed, she makes the primary ocean image of the original psalm, as presented in the Geneva Bible, merely a figurative vehicle to convey the tumult of the people:

Thy vertue staies the mighty mountaynes,  
Girded with pow’r, with strength abounding:  
The roaring damm of watry fountaines  
Thy beck doth make surcease hir sounding

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<sup>7</sup>The Geneva version was only one of a number of sources which Sidney used; but as the standard English Bible of the day it serves as a default source for her version.

When stormy uproares tosse the peoples brayn  
That civill sea to calme thou bringst agayn.

It is tempting to historicise this, or new historicise it, and read into Sidney's refocusing of the images an anxiety about the prospect of rebellion, a reading which might fit nicely into our perception of a major late Elizabethan concern with popular unrest. And certainly Sidney's stanza has embedded into it a potentially political vocabulary, setting "pow'r" and "strength" against the more subversive "roaring" and "uproars." Nonetheless, I think such an approach tends to play down the creative pleasure which informs all of Sidney's version of the Psalms as she continuously takes on the challenge of trying to understand the poetic logic of an original which, even in the reasonably literal translation of the Geneva Bible, she can only see through a glass very darkly.<sup>8</sup> In this case her challenge lay in trying to reconcile the last member of verse 7 with the natural imagery which has preceded it. What seems to be simply praise for God's power in creating and controlling vast natural forces—the kind of thing which Marvell imitates in "Bermudas"—suddenly and unexpectedly redefines itself down to praise for His controlling the peoples' rebellion. Instead of simply reproducing the apparently puzzling development of ideas in the original she boldly restructures them, making the mountain and the ocean merely metaphors for a rebellious people. In her stanza, rather than being an odd appendage to the main line of natural images, the political discontents become the whole point: and this is done not, I suggest, as a new historicist might argue, because of her or her culture's anxieties but much less passively because she tries to make coherent the psalm's development of its images.

As this Psalm develops it moves into a joyful celebration of God's watering of the land:

8. Thou waterest abundantly the furrows therof: thou causest the raine to descend into the valleies thereof: thou makest it soft with showres, and blessest the bud thereof.

9. Thou crownest the yeere with thy goodnesse, and the steps drop fatnesse.

10. They droppe upon the pastures of the wildernesse: and the hilles shall be compassed with gladnesse.

11. The pastures are clad with sheepe: the valleys also shall be covered with corne: therefore they shout for joy, and sing.

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<sup>8</sup>For instance, she would have had no conscious understanding of the basic parallelistic form of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament, its nature not being revealed until Robert Lowth's work two hundred years later.

Mary Sidney's translation of this passage is one of the most rousing things in her sequence, not least because she has in her mind's eye an English landscape of ploughland and hedgerows:

Drunk is each ridg of thy cupp drincking;  
 Each clodd relenteth at thy dressing:  
 Thy cloud-born waters inly sincking  
 Faire spring sproutes foorth blest with thy blessing.  
 the fertile yeare is with thy bounty crown'd:  
 and where thou go'st, thy goings fatt the ground.

Plenty bedewes the desert places:  
 a hedg of mirth the hills encloseth:  
 the fieldes with flockes have hid their faces:  
 a robe of corn the valleies clotheth.  
 Desertes, and hills, and fields, and valleys all,  
 rejoyce, showt, sing, and on thy name doe call.

It is a truism of criticism of early modern English poetry that it generally lacks engagement with the natural world, outside Shakespeare's sonnets and his comedies. When John Donne, for example, writes a poem about the primrose it turns out not to be in praise of the beauty of the flower but is instead, because of the number of its petals, a disquisition on the number five. Here, however, is genuine English nature poetry marked by a close observation of the details of the landscape and a luxurious intensification of the imagery of the original. "Thou waterest abundantly the furrows" becomes an image of the land inebriated with its bounty, focused on the detailed ridging of the ploughland, "Drunk is each ridg of thy cupp drincking;" and the Bible's rather general praise for the rain watering the valleys until the ground becomes soft is more vividly related through Mary Sidney's relenting clods and water sinking into the ground. Indeed, "clods" alerts us to the ways in which a much later poet, William Blake, responded to the Bible's naturalism. Very Blakean also are the effects in the second of these stanzas in which the Bible's "and the hills shall be compassed with gladness" is transformed into an image of singing hedges and the landscape is humanised by the idea of the fields hiding their faces because they are covered by such abundant flocks, rather than the Bible's clothing image, "the pastures are clad with sheep."

A key to all of this, and a true anticipation of English Romantic poetry particularly as expressed in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, is the sensation of joyfulness which Mary Sidney's imagery and rhythms convey. This is not, incidentally, an innocent point for it is in the quality of celebration which underpinned the singing of communal psalms that English Puritanism found aesthetic support for its ideology. As Barbara Lewalski reminds us, the impulse to sing songs of praise was reinforced by two New Testament verses: Col. 3:16,

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;” and Eph. 5:19, “Speaking to your selves, in Psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (Lewalski 1979: 37).

So, while the Psalms encouraged a poetry of lyric introspection and even alienation, something which Mary Sidney was well capable of following Thomas Wyatt in conveying, they paradoxically encouraged the alternative values of community and extrovert pleasure. Such a range is a demanding one and it took a poet of extraordinary talent to accomplish it. While there were dozens of attempts to paraphrase or translate the Psalms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries only Mary Sidney's version found a range of lyric forms capable of appropriating into English the range of experience which the Psalms covered. In doing this her work became a major influence upon the lyric poetry of the next two generations.

Having invoked Blake in an effort to summarise the joyous pastoralism of Mary Sidney's versification of Psalm 64, I need to invoke another nineteenth-century poet to convey the strangely detached effect of her translation of Psalm 127. This is the Psalm as it appears, in the Geneva Bible:

1. Except the Lord build the house, they laboure in vaine that build it: except the Lord keepe the citie, the keeper watcheth in vaine.
2. It is in vaine for you to rise early, and to lie downe late, and eate the bread of sorrow: but he will surely give rest to his beloved.
3. Behold, children are the inheritance of the Lord, and the fruite of the wombe his reward.
4. As are the arrowes in the hand of the strong man: so are the children of youth.
5. Blessed is the man, that hath his quiver full of them: for they shall not bee ashamed, when they speake to their enemies in the gate.

The striking thing about this small psalm is how politicised it becomes in the annotations which were attached to this version.<sup>9</sup> To “citie” (v.1) the marginal note reads, “The publike estate of the common wealth;” to the first clause of v.3 it reads, “Which watch and ward, and are also Magistrates, and rulers of the citie;” and to “they shall not bee ashamed” in the final verse, the margin adds, “Such children shall bee able to stop their adversaries mouthes when their godly life is maliciously accused before judges.”

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<sup>9</sup>The Geneva version's copious annotation included occasional comments which came to be seen as politically dangerous, hence James I's injunction to the Authorized Version translators not to supply any interpretive notes.

So, those who would see political or other subtexts in Sidney's work might reflect on how carefully she avoids in her translation of this psalm any word or image which has a specific political or even social significance. Instead in her hands it is transformed into a haunting lyric which emerges as one of the first great Calvinist poems in English. Its message, even more than in the biblical original, is that all human endeavour, civic or domestic, is doomed unless the doer is one of God's elect:

The house Jehova builds not,  
we vainly strive to build it:  
the towne Jehova guards not,  
we vainly watch to guard it.

No use of early rising:  
as uselesse is thy watching:  
not ought at all it helpes thee  
to eate thy bread with anguish.

As unto weary sences  
a sleepe rest unasked:  
soe bounty commeth uncaus'd  
from him to his beloved.

Noe not thy children hast thou  
by choise, by chaunce, by nature;  
they are, they are Jehovas,  
rewardes, from him rewarding.

The multitude of infantes,  
a good man holdes, resembleth  
the multitude of arrowes,  
a mighty Archer holdeth.

Hys happines triumpheth  
who beares a quiver of them:  
noe countenance of haters  
shall unto him be dreadfull.

The poet I have in mind is one of the last inheritors of the English nonconformist tradition which sprang from Elizabethan and Jacobean Calvinism, namely Emily Dickinson. In its rhythms and its curious formality, this experimental piece of verse, the last of eight consecutive psalms which Sidney wrote in quantitative metre without rhyme, here in anacreontics, has just the quality of detachment with which the later American poet observed the inscrutable workings of Providence. The effect is nearly proverbial, a series of sententiae which work out simultaneously the vanity of human effort and the

happiness which greets human achievement, with the corresponding wisdom to know that in each case the human himself is merely a pawn of God.

If we look at the way the poem is structured onto its biblical original, then we can see how flexible, within an essentially conservative treatment of her model, Sidney could be. In the Geneva text the opening verse clearly reproduces the biblical parallelism, allowing Sidney to write the first four lines of her opening stanza in exact correspondence.<sup>10</sup> This pattern continues into stanza two, except that the third and fourth lines of the stanza represent an expansion of just the third member of the biblical verse, "and eat the bread of sorrow." Then stanza three in its entirety paraphrases only the final member of verse two, "and he will surely give rest to his beloved." Here the image of an irresistible sleep overtaking the one who resists it as an equivalent for God's bounty showering upon the undeserving is the one major element in the poem which is not in the biblical psalm, but it is the true hinge of Sidney's poem, linking as it does the theme of fruitless effort in the first half of the poem with that of effortless reward in the second half.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas Sidney then gives two lines to each of the two members of verses 3 and 4, but in her versification of verse 4 notice that she reverses the biblical order. By doing this she creates an easier link into the final stanza. In this final stanza the first two lines, describing the archer's full quiver, are equivalent to the first member of the biblical verse, while the final two lines reverse the order of the last two members of the biblical psalm, allowing her to bring her poem to a halt on the wonderfully expressive word "dreadful."

In every psalm in her collection we may see Mary Sidney working in an equally creative way, experimenting with a huge variety of verse forms, appropriating and adapting the biblical imagery, and making full intelligent use of the English biblical language which went back at least to William Tyndale and probably to the late fourteenth-century English manuscript Bible. In the first two stanzas of Psalm 83, within a form in which each stanza rhymes abccab, the ab rhymes belonging to lines of eight syllables and the c rhyme to six syllable lines, she again begins by sticking very close to the original. She incorporates as much of its language as she can into her version in the first stanza and then she picks up the merest hints from the Bible to develop her own set of images in the second:

Be not, O be not silent still  
Rest not, O god, with endlesse rest:  
For lo thine enemies

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<sup>10</sup>This is spite of her not knowing about biblical parallelism: see note 8 above.

with noise and tumult rise;  
hate doth their hartes with fiercnes fill,  
and lift their heades who thee detest.

Against thy folk their witts they file  
to sharpest point of secret sleight:  
a world of trapps and traines  
they forge in busy braines,  
that they thy hid ones may beguile,  
whom thy wings shroud from serching sight.

These three opening verses in the Geneva version are fairly clearly constructed each of two members:

1. Keepe not thou silence, O God: be not still, and cease not, O God.
2. For lo, thine enemies make a tumult: and they that hate thee, have lifted up the head.
3. They have taken crafty counsel against thy people, and have consulted against thy secret ones.

In her version Mary Sidney gradually expands her response. Her opening two lines correspond to the Bible's first verse. The last four lines of the first stanza then correspond to the two members of verse 2. Then the whole of the second stanza corresponds to the two members of verse 3. Upon this structure she cleverly adapts the language and imagery of her biblical original. "Be not," which opens the poem and is then repeated in the first line, in itself an implicit challenge to God's self definition of one who absolutely is, is taken across from the second member of the biblical verse; "silence" becomes its adjective "silent" and "still" changes its sense, from the idea of not moving in the Bible to "always" in the poem. And the Bible's "cease not," meaning "continue your work," is revised into the image of "endless rest," as if God had withdrawn into an infinite sabbath. And while the remainder of the stanza picks up "lo thine enemies" and "tumult" from the Geneva text, Sidney expands the lifting of the heads image with a parallel filling of the heart, embedded into a neat chiasmus which links "hate" and "detest." Noteworthy, too, is the way in which the ab rhymes work to maximum effect, matching God's stillness and rest with His enemies' active hostility in "fill" and "detest."

All of this is wonderfully creative translation; but the second stanza is perhaps more accurately described as paraphrase. Taking her cue from "crafty counsel" and "consult" Sidney develops her own image of the blacksmith making traps and snares to hunt down the fledgling nation protected under God's wings. Sidney's editors, incidentally, describes this as a development of the bird imagery in the psalm, "showing a struggle between the people hidden under God's wings and the falconer who attempts to ensnare them" (Sidney 1998: 395). I do not think this is quite right, not least because I can not see any

bird imagery in the psalm. It is probably better described as an example of Sidney's transplanting a familiar image from elsewhere in Old Testament in order to develop here the image of the mysterious, brooding silence of God with which the psalm opens.

In the past, partly because it was a work of translation and translations seldom receive the recognition of a primary work, partly because it was done by a woman, and partly because its subject was biblical and we still have not recognised the vital role played in the emergence of high as well as low culture by the Bible, Mary Sidney's Psalms were seriously undervalued. Thanks to the pioneering work of scholars like Coburn Freer, Gary Waller and Mary Sidney's editors, we may now see these psalms for the remarkable achievement which they are: a laboratory for English lyric poetry, the working space for a powerful creative mind to think in a most concentrated fashion about a set of texts which had become central to her culture. As a result, not only did her work strongly influence English poetry but she also found different, often revolutionary ways of interpreting the psalms themselves.

A good example of this latter point is to see what she does to Psalm 119. The longest psalm in the book, it is an alphabet acrostic, consisting of twenty-two octaves, the first beginning with *aleph*, the second with *beth*, and so on. So, Mary Sidney begins the first poem of Psalm 119 with the letter *A*, "An undefiled course..." the second begins "By what correcting line..." the third, "Confer, O Lord..." and so on down to "Yield me this favour Lord" (she omits *J*, *U*, *X* and *Z*).<sup>11</sup> But remarkably, unlike the major precedents for versified psalms from which she worked such as the French version by Clement Marot, she gives each of the sections an entirely different form, making the whole psalm itself a little anthology of the English lyric. In formal terms the effect is sometimes astonishingly prophetic, as in *D*, where the first stanza anticipates what Henry Vaughan will do half a century later:

Dead as if I were,  
 my soule to dust doth cleave:  
 lord keepe thy word, and doe not leave  
 me here:  
 but quicken me a new.  
 when I did confesse  
 my sinnfull waies to thee,  
 as then thy eare thou did'st to me  
 adresse:  
 soe teach me now, thy statutes true.

Compare this with a stanza from Vaughan's poem "Burial" (1976: 182):

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<sup>11</sup>The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters.

And nothing can, I hourly see,  
     Drive thee from me,  
 Thou art the same, faithful, and just  
     In life, or dust;  
     Though then (thus crumbed) I stray  
     In blasts,  
 Or exhalations, and wastes  
     Beyond all eyes  
     Yet thy love spies  
     That change, and knows thy clay.

In *F*, with its metronomic metre and simple rhymes, she produces a poem from the low culture of the English metrical psalm, rather as Marvell was to do in “Bermudas” (first two stanzas):

Franckly poure O Lord on me  
 saving grace, to sett me free:  
 that supported I may see  
 promise truly kept by thee.

That to them who me defame,  
 roundly I may answer frame:  
 who because thy word and name  
 are my trust, thus seeke my shame.

And in *P* she creates, as George Herbert will do in *The Temple*, a shaped poem, in stanzas which take the form of a column on a base, signaled at the opening of the second stanza by the request to God to “Be my Pillar, be my stay.”

Accordingly, to read Mary Sidney’s Psalms merely as poems allows us to recognize the major contribution which they made to the development of the English lyric; but to do this only is to miss the point about them, that they are in every respect responsible translations which do what the best translations do, namely attempt to understand the meaning and purposes of the original. Tending towards dynamic rather than formal equivalence, as any poetic translation is likely to do, they frequently explore the structure of the original. The best example I can find to illustrate this quality is Psalm 52, a poem which, addressed to the wicked, contrasts his inevitable downfall with the protection which God offers to the good. This is first the psalm as it appears in the Geneva Bible:

Why boastest thou thy selfe in thy wickednesse, O man of power? the  
 loving kindnesse of God endureth dayly.  
 Thy tongue imagineth mischief, and is like a sharpe rasor that cutteth  
 deceitfully.  
 Thou doest love evill more then good, and lies, more then to speake the  
 trueth. Selah.

Thou lovest all wordes that may destroy, O deceitfull tongue!  
 So shall God destroy thee for ever: he shall take thee and plucke thee  
 out of thy tabernacle, and roote thee out of the land of the living. Selah.  
 The righteous also shall see it, and feare, and shall laugh at him, saying,  
 Behold the man that tooke not God for his strength, but trusted unto the  
 multitude of his riches, and put his strength in his malice.  
 But I shall be like a green olive tree in the house of God: for I trusted in  
 the mercie of God for ever and ever.  
 I will always prayse thee for that thou hast done this, and I will hope in  
 thy Name, because it is good before thy Saints.

In the Geneva translation the contrast between the good and the wicked is only implicit in the opening verse of the psalm, something which Mary Sidney addresses by importing a "since" to make the second half of the stanza an explicit answer to the question posed in the first two lines:

Tyrant whie swel'st thou thus,  
                   of mischief vantage?  
 since helpe from god to us,  
                   is never wanting?

Lewd lies thy tongue contrives,  
                   lowd lies it soundeth:  
 sharper then sharpest knives  
                   with lies it woundeth.

Falshood thy witt approves,  
                   all truth rejected:  
 thy will all vices loves,  
                   vertue neglected.

Not wordes from cursed thee,  
                   but gulphes are powred.  
 Gulphes wherin daily bee  
                   good men devoured.

Think'st thou to beare it soe?  
                   God shall displace thee  
 God shall thee overthrow,  
                   Crush thee, deface thee.

The Just shall fearing see  
                   theis fearefull chaunces:  
 and laughing shoot at thee  
                   with scornfull glaunces.

Loe, loe, the wretched wight,  
                   who god disdainning,  
 his mischief made his might,

his guard his gaining.

I as an Olive tree,  
     still greene shall flourish:  
 Gods howse the soile shall bee  
     my rootes to nourish.

My trust on his true love  
     truly attending,  
 Shall never thence remove,  
     never see ending.

Thee will I honor still  
     lord for this justice:  
 There fix my hopes I will,  
     where thy saints trust is.

Thy saints trust in thy name,  
     therin they joy them.  
 protected by the same  
     nought can anoy them.

Read simply as a poem, Sidney's psalm is a triumphant display of the capabilities of the English lyric. Its rhythmic effects are determined in nearly every stanza by an initial trochee. The form of alternating six and five syllable lines in each stanza makes the psalmist's confrontation with the wicked abrasively urgent, as if there is not quite time to achieve a regular balance of line lengths, an effect intensified by the use of weak rhymes for lines 2 and 4 in each stanza. There is, too, throughout the poem a haunting pattern of repetition, launched in the second stanza by the play on "lewd lies" and "loud lies" and underscored in the last two by the repetition of "thy saints trust" with "trust" a noun in the penultimate stanza and a verb in the last.

Most interesting of all, however, is the sense Mary Sidney has made of her original, subtly correcting its emphasis and balance. Following stanza one, in which her "since" brings out more fully the contrast between the wicked man, the tyrant who vaunts his mischief, and "us", the good who receive God's help, she translates the following six stanzas quite conservatively, thereby matching verses 2-7 in the biblical psalm. Then, her last four stanzas much less conservatively expand on only two verses of the original, numbers eight and nine. Why does she do this? The answer must be that she reinterprets the original to make it exactly equal in balancing the wicked and the good. In the biblical psalm, apart from the first verse, which is equally divided between the two, five of the remaining eight verses describe the wicked (nos 2-5 and 7) and three describe the good (no 6 and 8-9). In Mary Sidney's poem stanza one's equal division introduces an equal division in the rest, with five stanzas

describing the wicked (nos. 2-5 and 7) and five describing the good (no 6 and 8-11). Consequently her poem has a clear balance to it, its structural fulcrum being the see-saw stanzas 6-7 which tip it from a confrontation with evil towards a celebration of goodness. This new structure makes much more logical to the English reader the shift from the general to the personal at the end of the psalm, where it is the psalmist who celebrates his own certainty of salvation through the image of the properly rooted olive tree.

I began this paper with a psalmic poem by Andrew Marvell, in order to show how with some historical contextualising it is possible to read a text in a new and unexpected way. By thinking of "Bermudas" as an exploration into the mind-set of those who sang metrical psalms we can see the poem as a shrewd piece of political analysis, fit to set beside "An Horatian Ode on Cromwell's Return from Ireland," rather than an example of Marvell himself innocently rhapsodising the beauty of creation. But with Mary Sidney's Psalms my aim has been the opposite, to argue against historicising them; for much of the history of their analysis so far has tended toward the reductive, either in the hands of gender historians or new historicists. This is the point of my analysis of the structure of Psalm 52. In her generally excellent biography of Mary Sidney Margaret Hannay, taking her cue from historicist approaches, chooses to discuss her Psalms almost entirely in political terms. Presented to Elizabeth I in 1599, they represent, she argues, a sustained exemplification of the militant Protestantism for which she and her brother had worked and an exhortation to the Queen and her ministers to continue a fierce anti-Catholic foreign policy (Hannay 1990: chap. 24).

In arguing this case Hannay adduces plenty of evidence that the biblical psalms were so used from the Reformation onwards, with particular psalms carrying very specific political loading. Psalm 52 is a case in point. It had become "an explicit parallel for the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre" and she quotes from several English sources to show how it was read "as a direct accusation against those in Rome who were boasting of the massacre" (93). But when we look at the structure of Sidney's Psalm 52 we see something quite different. Rather than a public propaganda piece, made up largely of a direct accusation against the tyrant, she reconfigures it into a poem which merely uses the tyrant in its first half in order to explore and celebrate the nature of the saint in the second half.

What her Psalm 52 demonstrates is not the primary impulse of the politician or propagandist but instead the impulse of a translator and lyric poet. Not that these two impulses are necessarily at odds: lyric poetry, as in the case of poets like Herrick, Lovelace or Marvell, can often convey intense if subtle engagement with contemporary issues. But another impulse at the heart of lyric

poetry is a meditative and introspective one, prizing the private and intimate over the public and patriotic. In Mary Sidney's work of translation we see a double pleasure. First the pleasure of what is difficult as she works continuously, perhaps over seventeen years, to find forms and structures to convey the sense of a distant and alien original. The second pleasure is the development of the private poem, to such an extent that even Psalm 52, a notoriously propagandist piece against tyrants and the persecutors of Protestants, emerges in her version as something quite different, a moving meditation upon the poet's contented realisation of how deep-rooted and enduring is her love of God —not a call to arms but a call to sit under the olive tree.

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