

There's something
about mary (sidney)



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Before the year 1611, many different translations of the bible existed, but none were very consistent. At this time, at the command of King James the First, forty-seven scholars from various theological and educational backgrounds, separated into six individual groups, completed the task of translating the bible from the original Hebrew manuscripts and existing English documents. Mary Sidney would have been very familiar with the resulting King James Version of the bible, as would have been any other educated person in eighteenth-century England. In her paraphrase of “ Psalm 139,” it appears as though Sidney does not feel as though the King James Version adequately expresses her innermost thoughts. The Psalms in the bible are a production of a number of authors, the most prominent of these being David. While David’s Psalms contain his most intimate thoughts about God, Sidney frequently takes these thoughts and develops them further. At times, she seems to display more confidence than David does, yet at others, she appears more docile and reserved. Though she eloquently paraphrases David’s work in beautiful verse, she lacks consistency, and her overall credibility suffers for it. One of the most obvious differences between the King James Version of “ Psalm 139,” and Mary Sidney’s version is style. Though the Psalms are traditionally known to be songs written by David, “ Psalm 139” does not seem to be very structured in the King James Version. It is made up of twenty-four verses that roughly consist of two iambic pentameter lines each. However, verse one only has one line, and verses twelve, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen contain three lines each. Though it appears that the author attempted to form each line with ten beats, they range from six to twelve beats, and are not necessarily made up of even feet. Often, this leaves one feeling awkward, as the reader expects there to

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be one more beat in the line in order for it to sound complete. The second line in verse six exemplifies this dilemma: “ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;/ it is high, I cannot attain unto it.” One would expect that the first line of this verse requires an equally formally constructed follow up, yet the reader is left with a sense of incompleteness. This makes sense, however, as the translators were likely trying to keep the text as true to the original as possible, which decreased the importance of stylistic devices such as rhyme and meter. Sidney chooses to approach “ Psalm 139” more poetically. She writes thirteen stanzas, which each contain seven meticulously crafted lines in iambic tetrameter. In each stanza, Sidney does not deviate from an ABCCBAB rhyme scheme, which is extremely difficult to adhere to, especially when one is translating. Her ability to do this alone highlights Sidney's poetic prowess. However, Sidney had substantially more freedom to make use of poetic devices than did the writers of the King James version, resulting in stanzas that seem fluid and natural. What at one time was “ Thou hast beset me behind and before,/ and laid thine hand upon me/ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;/ it is high, I cannot attain unto it” (KJV v. 5-6), gracefully metamorphoses into “ If forth I march, thou goest before,/ If back I turn, thou com'st behind:/ So forth nor back/ Thy guard I lack,/ Nay on me too thy hand I find./ Well I thy wisdom may adore,/ But never reach with earthly mind” (Sidney, l. 15-21). The way in which Sidney paraphrases “ Psalm 139” reveals much about her feelings and attitudes regarding God. She seems to feel closer to God than the translators of the King James Version will allow. While David states that God “ knowest my downsitting and mine uprising;/ thou knowest my thought afar off” (KJV v. 2), Sidney is not content to simply believe that God knows her actions and understands her thoughts from afar.

To her, God takes a much more active interest in her daily activities: “ For when I sit/ Thou markest it;/ No less thou notest when I rise;/ Yea, closest closet of my thought/ Hath open windows to thine eyes” (l. 3-7). God not only knows about her daily activities, but also makes note of them. God does not simply observe her thoughts from Heaven, but witnesses the “ closest closet” of her mind. Though David is often described as “ a man after God’s own heart,” Sidney certainly seems to feel a closer emotional bond with God than he does. Sidney continues this sense of closeness throughout the poem. David feels that God directs his footsteps, but Sidney actually feels God walking with her (l. 8). She goes on to say that she feels God’s presence everywhere she goes, while David refrains from making this claim. There is nothing to prove he does not feel God’s omnipresence, but it is Sidney who vocalises this concept. Perhaps this can be explained by Sidney’s relatively carefree life. While David is forced to run from a crazed, jealous king, and witnesses the incestuous rape of his daughter and violent death of his son, Sidney had only critics to worry about. Perhaps it is not so surprising that she feels more content in God’s shelter than does David. It is curious, then, that Sidney should personify night as a pro-active villain, whereas David simply refers to it as “ darkness.” Sidney challenges night to “ Do thou thy best... / In sable veil to cover me:/ Thy sable veil/ Shall vainly fail” (l. 36-39). David simply states that “ If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me;/ even the night shall be light about me” (v. 11). Though David has faced many more adversities in his life than Sidney has, and does not appear to feel as close to God as Sidney does, he does not seem to fear attack to the same extent that Sidney does. Sidney’s defiant challenge to night reveals that although she is confident that God can overcome and defeat darkness, she still worries

about that same darkness. She sees night as an opposing force that has somehow singled her out, whereas David simply acknowledges darkness as an entity with which God will deal. This is a strange phenomenon, because in reality, David has much more to worry about than Sidney does, yet she seems to obsess about her safety. One could argue that David is not concerned about darkness because he has had the opportunity to witness God's power first hand, whereas Sidney lives a relatively sheltered lifestyle. Sidney continues to take David's thoughts one step further in line forty-three. David tells God that He is in control of his life, and has "possessed [his] reigns" (v. 13). This implies that David retains possession of his person, but has relinquished all governance of himself to God. Sidney tells God that "Each inmost piece in me is thine" (l. 43). She is not only giving control of her independent life to God, but is in fact giving every part of herself to Him. As anyone who has ridden horses knows, sometimes simply holding on to the reigns is not enough to control a strong-willed animal. This is especially true with David. Though he willingly gives God the "reigns" to his life, he can, and does choose to commit abominable crimes in God's sight. He has Bathsheeba's husband, Uriah, killed so that he can take her as his wife (2 Samuel, ch. 11. KJV). He knows this is wrong at the time, yet fiercely fights against God's control of his life. Like a belligerent horse, reigns mean nothing to him. In this light, it appears as though Sidney is attempting to release herself from free-choice, as she knows that left to her own devices, she too, will rebel against God's will. Though Sidney appears to be completely comfortable in her faith, at one point, she seems to contradict herself. She states "My God, how I these studies prize,/ That do thy hidden workings show" (l. 64-65), implying that when God makes His thoughts known to her,

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he also reveals His secrets. However, in lines twenty and twenty-one, she states “ Well I thy wisdom may adore,/ But never reach with earthly mind.” David appears to be more humble in this matter, and simply says, “ How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God” (v. 17). He does not make any lofty claims of understanding God or his “ hidden workings.” He is content to simply hear God’s voice, and does not attempt to decipher His thoughts. Though Sidney certainly does not claim to know all of God’s secrets, to profess to know even some of them borders on conceit. This conceit is also evident in other lines of Sidney’s paraphrase. David places God first in all of his collected thoughts. Even if he flees from God, he knows that God must necessarily be before him. He writes, “ If I take the wings of the morning,/ and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;/ even there shall thy hand lead me,/ and thy right hand shall hold me” (v. 10-11). David knows that God’s hands lead him, and is therefore at all times in front of him. Sidney does not seem to share this sentiment. She states, “ I could flee,/ As far as thee the ev’ning brings:/ Even led to west he would me catch” (l. 32-34). For God to be able to catch her implies that He is behind her, which means that Sidney has the ability to temporarily escape God and be in front of Him. This is very curious coming from one whom alleges, “ each inmost piece in me is [God’s]” (l. 43). Though it may seem trivial to note such a seemingly small matter in her poem, it is not as unimportant as it might first appear. Sidney is a brilliant poet, and chooses her words very carefully. She purposely changes David’s assertion that God always leads him, to one in which she is capable of leading God, if even for a very short period of time. God will catch her, but first he must follow her. Sidney is interesting in that she seems extraordinarily confident at some times, and hesitant and timid at

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others. In verse nineteen, David confidently proclaims “ Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God:/ depart from me therefore, ye bloody men.” He knows without any doubt that God will destroy those whom oppose Him. David does not question God’s ability to do so, and boldly tells those whom threaten him to depart immediately. Sidney is not so brave. She hesitantly petitions God: “ if thou but one wouldst kill,/ Then straight would leave my further chase/ This cursed brood” (l. 71-73). She almost appears to be begging God to remove these obstacles from her path, and only half believes that He will do so. She does not address her actual assailants as David does, for she is not convinced of God’s desire or ability to rescue her. Instead, she quietly asks God for help, and attempts to avoid further provocation of her enemies. Although Sidney frequently attempts to surpass David’s heartfelt confessions, sometimes her narrow-mindedness becomes apparent. David is “ grieved with those that rise up against [God]” (v. 21), whereas Sidney simply hates them: “ Detest I not,/ The cankered knot,/ Whom I against thee banded see?” (l. 80-82). David’s reactive emotions are much more complex than are Sidney’s. According to the Gage Canadian Dictionary, grief is “ deep sadness caused by trouble or loss; heavy sorrow,” and to detest is to “ dislike very much.” David does not simply dislike those whom oppose God, but is instead filled with feelings of great sorrow. He could be upset that there are people that could possibly hate the loving God that he knows. He could also feel sorrow for those people who do not know the peace and safety that David knows through his relationship with God. Whatever the case may be, hate has given rise to other emotions within him. For Sidney, the situation is much different. She simply hates those whom oppose God, and feels nothing more. She does not think any more about the motives or

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consequences of her enemy's actions, as David does. It seems as though David would prefer to have his adversaries on his side, whereas Sidney simply wants them eradicated. Another one of Sidney's weaknesses is that she does not seem to fully grasp the concept of God's grace. David beseeches God to "search me... and know my heart:/ try me, and know my thoughts:/ and see if there be any wicked way in me,/ and lead me in the way everlasting" (v. 23-24). Sidney's version is quite different: "Search me, my God, and prove my heart,/ examine me, and try my thought;/ And mark in me/ If ought there be/ That hath with cause their anger wrought./ If not (as not) my life's each part,/ Lord safely guide from danger brought" (l. 85-91). David encourages God to know, or become intimate, with his heart. He wants God to point out not only those things that anger his adversaries, but all things in him that are wicked. He realizes, though, that it is impossible to be entirely without sin, so he asks God to lead him "in the way everlasting" with no provisions attached. Sidney, however, only asks God to mark those things in her that bring anger to her enemies. It also appears as though she believes that she has the ability to be without sin. She does not ask God to simply know her heart, but solicits him to prove it. In other words, she wants God to examine her heart, and proclaim that there is nothing evil about it. At the end of the poem, she requests that God deliver her from danger only if He finds her heart completely without fault. Though David knows this is impossible, Sidney evidentially does not share his belief. One of the most interesting contrasts between the King James Version of "Psalm 139" and Sidney's paraphrase exists in the last line of each poem. David asks God to lead him in the "way everlasting," while Sidney implores God to safely guide her away from danger. Because David mentions the everlasting, he

apparently believes in Heaven, and believes that he is destined to reside there. However, the reader cannot be so certain of Sidney's belief. She does not mention Heaven throughout her poem, although David mentions it twice. Her final request to God does not even indicate a belief of the afterlife. Does Sidney even have faith in life after death? Does she believe in predestination, and is therefore not certain of her salvation, causing her to avoid confidently proclaiming her eternal safety? Either explanation is entirely possible, but unfortunately, the text is ambiguous in this regard, and it is up to the reader to decide why Sidney would purposely leave out references to Heaven. Overall, Sidney certainly seems to feel close to God, and does not hesitate to extol his knowledge and power. However, she seems to lack the same unflinching confidence in God's wisdom and capabilities that David possesses. Whether she actually is as uncertain of God's might as she appears, or if she is simply limited by the daunting task of paraphrasing a well-known psalm into a formal style, is inconsequential. Her weaknesses may show, but if her goal was to create a poem unparalleled in structure and beauty, she succeeded.

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