

Conceit beyond expectation

Mary Sidney's Rhyming Rhetoric in Psalm 55 *Exaudi, Deus*

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At the centre of what is frequently referred to as 'The Sidney Circle' we find Mary Sidney, poet and patron.¹ That she was also sister to the better known Philip Sidney is of some importance too of course, but recent studies, like the present, try to give her the identity she deserves in her own right as one of the most sophisticated masters of poetry Elizabethan Britain produced. Unfortunately, times have left us little material produced by this wonderful woman, the reasons for which are numerous and complicated and may be worth articles of their own.

Mary Sidney (1561-1621) became Mary Countess of Pembroke in 1577 and lived at Wilton in Wiltshire. The estate was obviously large enough to house a generously furnished library and many visiting writers, because the Countess was known to be a generous patron. Among the writers associated with her we find Samuel Daniel, Fulke Greville, Abraham

¹ The literary circle in question is thus called due to the close connection with Philip Sidney. After her brother's death however, The Countess continued to attract poets to an even greater extent, hence I intend to redefine the Sidney Circle with Mary Sidney as connecting nexus. For studies on the Sidney Circle see Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); G. F. Waller, *Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. A critical study of her writings and literary milieu*. Elizabethan & Renaissance Studies, ed. Dr James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1979)

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Fraunce, and, of course, her brother, although the latter was hardly in need of her patronage.¹

Rhetorical Poetry and Manipulative Rhymes

And though Bookes, Madame, cannot make this minde,
Which we must bring apt to be set aright,
Yet do they rectify it in that kinde,
And touch it so, as that it turns that way
Where judgements lies: And though we cannot finde
The certain place of truth, yet do they stay,
And intertaine us neere about the same,
And give the soule the best delights that may
Encheere it most, and most our spirits inflame
To thoughts of glory, and to worthy ends.²

That poetry and rhetoric are confounded and conflated in the Renaissance, is easily discovered when considering and comparing contemporary definitions of the two arts. Samuel Daniel's description above reveals many of the commonplace attitudes to poetry. According to Philip Sidney, poets

merely make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach; and delight, to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without they would fly as from a stranger; and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved – which being the noblest scope to which ever learning was directed.³

These two members of the Sidney Circle seem to define poetry more in terms of its function and effect than style and manner.

¹ For bibliographic information on the Countess, see Frances Berkeley Young, *Mary Sidney Countess of Pembroke* (London: David Nutt, 1912)

² *Samuel Daniel, Poems and A Defence of Rhyme*, ed. Arthur Colby Sprague (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 118. Further references in the text.

³ Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J.A. Van Dorsten (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1966, repr. 1996) p. 27. Further references in the text.

Poetry should teach men to know goodness, and at the same time move them to do good actions. Poetry should also delight, for without the delightful pleasantness of ornament the base wit of man would not be receptive to learning. Richard Rainolde, in his rhetorical treatise *The Foundacion of Rhetoric*, compares the art of rhetoric to an open hand that hides nothing, "[s]o of like sorte, in moste ample and large maner, dilateth and setteth out small thynges or woordes (. . .) that the most stonie and hard hartes cannot but be incensed, inflamed and, moved therto."¹ Rhetoric too, it seems, aims at teaching and moving, and is quite frequently defined in terms of its effects. In fact, when other art forms aim at teaching we tend to say they have a rhetorical intention. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, but what else is teaching but an effort to persuade people to believe what you say to be true and right, the ultimate goal of which is influencing behaviour. Thus Wayne Rebhorn concludes the following: "As the Renaissance sees it, then, rhetoric is no language game; it is a serious business that aims to affect people's beliefs and produce real action in the world."² Poetry and rhetoric are, when defined in terms of function and effect, equal and alike, united by their application of eloquence to an edifying end. However, poets and orators claim to be different in profession. In the words of Cicero, "[t]he truth is that the poet is a very near kinsman of the orator, rather more heavily fettered as regards rhythm, but with ampler freedom in his choice of words, while in the use of many sorts of ornament he is his allay and almost his counterpart."³ Thus, although a poem and an oration differ in certain regards they aim at the same effect on the reader or listener and share the eloquent use of ornament.

¹ Richard Rainolde, *The Foundacion of Rhetorike* (1563), p. 7.

² Wayne A. Rebhorne, *The Emperor of Men's Minds* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 4.

³ Cicero, *De Oratore* I-II, Loeb Classical Library edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948, repr. 1996), p. 51.

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Rhyme is claimed by both Sidney and Daniel to be such an ornament with which the poet may polish what Sidney calls "that blessing of speech" (Dorsten, 50). Calling himself a 'rymer', Daniel defines rhyme as "number and harmonie of words, consisting of an agreeing sound in the last silables of severall verses, giving both to the Eare and Eccho of a delightfull report & to the Memorie a deeper impression of what is delivered therein" (Colby Sprague, p. 132). Rhyme serves as an aid to express thoughts in poetry and helps the reader or listener store these ideas in memory. While admitting that "it is not rhyming or versing that maketh poesy," Philip Sidney insists that "if reading be foolish without remembering, memory being the only treasure of knowledge, those words which are fittest for memory are likewise most convenient for knowledge" (Dorsten, p. 50). He explains how rhymed words possess such a mnemonic quality in that they ensure unity, "being so set as one cannot be lost but the whole work fails" (Ibid.). Tasso, in his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* gives the same criterion for unity and Maren-Sofie Røstvig explains how such connection between parts conveys poetic meaning.¹ This is certainly true of the poem I have chosen as my illustration. In addition, rhymed words anticipate each other so that "by the former a man shall have a near guess at the follower" (Dorsten, p. 51). Finally, he claims that rhymed verse may serve the art of memory on a par with the mnemonic technique of placing, in your imagination, what you must remember in a well-known room, because in verse, "every word has his natural seat, which seat must needs make the word remembered" (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, rhyme is but an ornament to poetry, or, in the words of Daniel, an "excellencie added to this work of measure" (Colby Sprague, p. 132). He agrees with Sidney in that "the skill of each artificer standeth in the *idea* or fore-

¹ Maren-Sofie Røstvig, *Configurations A Topomorphical Approach to Renaissance Poetry* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994), p 203.

conceit of the work, and not in the work itself" (Dorsten, p. 24). Daniel and Sidney use 'invention' too as a label for this 'idea or fore-conceit', and it seems to be the equivalent to the rhetorical 'inventio', the first part of rhetoric according to Cicero. "The orator must first hit upon what to say, then manage and marshal his discoveries, not merely in orderly fashion, but with a discriminating eye for the exact weight as it were of each argument; next go on to array it in the adornments of style."¹ The same process is right for poetry: the poet has an idea, arranges his arguments in an abstract plan and executes and adorns this plan with words. Sidney's claim is that the poet's idea may be revealed by contemplation of his poetry: "And that the poet hath that idea is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them" (Dorsten, p. 24). It is the poet's invention which is so morally profitable for the reader, although he or she must access it through the poet's words. As Maren-Sofie Røstvig explains, "[t]here is no virtue in the numbers themselves; they are characters and symbols only, showing how things are done."² Renaissance poets and rhetoricians often speak of words as clothes with which to dress their inventions. "Indeed," states Philip Sidney "the senate of poets hath chosen verse as their fittest raiment" (Dorsten, p. 27). John Campion, against whose campaign for quantitative verse Daniel wrote his defence, is accused, in Daniel's treatise, of having "but found other clothes to the same body, and peradventure not so fitting as the former" (Colby Sprague, p. 135), 'the former' being rhyme. Although hardly used by orators, rhyme is consistently used by poet Mary Sidney. Let us explore how she employs her excellent gift of rhyming to express her morally profitable invention in translating and versifying David's Psalm 55.

My God most glad to look, most prone to heere,

¹ Cicero, I, xxxi. p, 142.

² Røstvig, p. 8.

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An open eare O let my praier find,
And from my plaint turne not thy face away.
Behold my gestures, harken what I say
5 While uttering mones with most tormented mind.
My body I no lesse torment and teare,
For loe, their fearful threatnings wound mine eare,
Who griefs on griefs on me still heaping laie,
A mark to wrath and hate and wrong assign'd;
10 Therefore my hart hath all his force resign'd
To trembling pants, Deaths terrors on me pray,
I feare, nay shake, nay quiv'ring quake with feare.

Then say I, O might I but cutt the wind,
Born on the wing the fearfull dove doth beare:
15 Stay would I not, till I in rest might stay.
Far hence, O far, then would I take my way
Unto the desert, and repose me there,
These stormes of woe, these tempests left behind:
But swallow them, O Lord, in darkness blind,
20 Confound their councells, leade their tongues astray,
That what they meane by wordes may not appeare;
For Mother Wrong within their towne each where,
And daughter Strife their ensignes so display,
As if they only thither were confin'd.

25 These walk their cittie walles both night and day,
Oppressions, tumults, guiles of ev'ry kind
Are burgesses, and dwell the midle neere;
About their streetes his masking robes doth weare
Mischief, cloth'd in deceit, with treason lin'd,
30 Where only hee, hee only beares the sway.
But not my foe with mee this pranck did play,
For then I would have borne with patient cheere
An unkind part from whom I know unkind;
Nor hee whose forhed Envies mark had sign'd,
35 His trophes on my ruins sought to reare,
From whom to fly I might have made essay.

But this to thee, to thee impute I may,
My fellow, my companion, held most deere,

My soule, my other self, my inward frend:
40 Whom unto me, me unto whom did bind
 Exchanged secrets, who together were
 Gods temple wont to visit, there to pray.
 O lett a suddaine death work their decay,
 Who speaking faire, such canckred malice mind,
45 Let them be buried breathing in their beir.
 But purple morn, black ev'n, and midday cleare,
 Shall see my praying voice to God enclin'd,
 Rowzing him up; and nought shall me dismay.

He ransom'd me, he for my saftie fin'd
50 In fight where many sought my soule to slay;
 He still, him self, (to noe succeeding heire
 Leaving his Empire) shall no more forbear:
 But, at my motion, all these Atheists pay,
 By whom (still one) such mischiefs are design'd;
55 Who but such caitives would have undermin'd,
 Nay overthrowne, from whom but kindness meare
 They never found? who would such trust betray?
 What buttred wordes! yet warr their harts bewray;
 Their speach more sharp than sharpest sword or
 speare
60 Yet softer flowes than balme from wounded rinde.

But, my ore loaden soule, thy selfe upcheare:
 Cast on Gods shoulders what thee down doth waigh,
 Long borne by thee with bearing pain'd and pin'd;
 To care for thee he shall be ever kinde.
65 By him the just, in safety held allway,
 Chaunglesse shall enter, live, and leave the yeare:
 But, Lord, how long shall these men tarry here?
 Fling them in pitt of death where never shin'd
 The light of life; and while I make my stay
70 On thee, let who their thirst with bloud allay
 Have their life-holding threed so weakly twin'd
 that it, half spunne, death may in sunder sheare.¹

¹ Because the scope of this paper is to show how linkage between parts create unity in the poem I have chosen to include it in its entirety. This

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When you start reading this 72 lines long, end-rhymed poem, you are compelled by its ingenious use of merely three rhyme sounds, each repeated 24 times; the ones found in *heere*, *find* and *away*. I will have to distinguish between the underlying rhyme-pattern and the actual sound-pattern when analysing this Psalm. The former consists in rhyme-positions and will be denoted by numbers, and the latter consists in the rhyme-words placed in these positions and will be denoted by letters in the following manner:

heere	1	a
find	2	b
away	3	c
say	3	c
mind	2	b
teare	1	a
eare	1	a
laie	2	c
assign'd	3	b
resign'd	3	b
pray	2	c
feare	1	a

The Countess seems to have put great effort into avoiding the repetitiousness that all these repeated sounds may create. As seen when exploring the whole poem, the position-pattern is consistent in all stanzas, although the sound-pattern varies so that no two stanzas are audibly the same. Each stanza is rendered circular and whole by connecting the beginning, line 1, with the middle, lines 6-7, and the end, line 12, and this is true for the position-pattern as well as the sound-pattern. The positions are placed symmetrically around the middle and

version is taken from J. C. A. Rathmell's edited publication *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), pp. 126-128.

That heaven's King may daigne his owne transform'd
in substance no, but superficiall tire
by thee put on; to praise, not to aspire
To, those high Tons, so in themselves adorn'd,
(Rathmell, xxxv, 8-11)

What this 'error' indicates, then, is that the rhymed circles in Psalm 55 really *do* create unity and wholeness. It serves the purpose of the exception that proves the rule and an 'error' which reveals the poet's humanity and excuses her aspiration to divine perfection.

How can the circles in this poem effect the rhetorical end of poetry, to delight, teach, and move? The Geneva Bible explains how a distressed David utters "moste ardent affections to move the Lord to pitie him. After being assured of deliverance, he setteth forthe the grace of God as though he had already obtained his request."¹ The Psalm is then defined as "A psalme of David to give instruction,"² and I claim that the Countess too sets forth the grace of God to give instruction. At this point, religion enters and unity and the circle must be treated in a more sacred perspective.

That man is created in the image of God is stated in the Holy Scriptures. Man should thus be one with God. This unity is the perfect state for man. However, due to unfortunate circumstances in the Garden of Eden, postlapsarian man is no longer 'on-line' with God – the flesh is in the way. After the fall of Adam, sighs Sidney, "our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it" (Dorsten, p. 25). Therefore, in a Christian society moral education will consist in efforts to return to God and to reach unto perfection. The poet, says Sidney, is blessed with an edifying ability "to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as

¹ *The Geneva Bible*. A Facsimile of the 1560 edition (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), gloss, leaf 246v.

² *Ibid.*

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our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of" (Dorsten, p. 28). Ultimately, the rhetorical scope of poetry is, according to Sidney, "to know, and by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own essence" (Ibid.). How exactly does the poet edify?

Pythagoras saw deity in unity and Augustine adapted the concept of unity to apply to God as we know him. Maren-Sofie Røstvig devotes chapter one of her book *Configurations* to "Augustine and the Vision of Unity." God is the highest unity, and his creation will bear his "imprint."¹ That is why the moral education may take place, and Røstvig explains how:

As Augustine puts it in *De Vera Religione*: to be made in the image of God is to be made for unity, so that we instinctively love the wisdom which orders everything so sweetly (Wisdom 8:1). Nothing can be more beautiful than its ordering and adorning of the visible, physical universe, and it is this order we admire in a work of art. By contemplating this order, therefore, the mind is led back to God.²

What remains is the connection between God and the circle. George Puttenham supplies it when discussing proportion: The "Rondell or Spheare" is "[t]he most excellent of all the figures Geometricall . . . for his many perfections." Its perfection lies chiefly in that it "beareth a similitude with God and eternitie" because it has neither beginning nor end and is thus eternal.³ The circle is the figure most apt to represent eternity and God, because it too lacks beginning and end, has no edges, and is all-encompassing. A poem, however, being a product of the physical world of particulars, must be begun and ended, and the best way to achieve unity in a poem is to end with the beginning, thus creating such a circle. Samuel Daniel insists

¹ Røstvig, p. 3.

² Ibid.

³ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1598), p. 81.

that a poem should end where it started when he criticises classical poets for "either not concluding or else otherwise in the end than they began" (Colby Sprague, p. 138). By ending with the beginning, a 'roundel' is created and unity is ensured.

Thus, circular poetry shows the reader his divine origin; he or she is taught truth and goodness which is what God is. In addition, poetry should also move the reader to practice what poetry preaches. Again I turn to Røstvig for an explanation: "If the establishing of harmony is the process which leads man back to God, then the image of the circle will express the same idea of a return."¹ Hence the circle is also an image of man's movement back to God. In his struggle towards God, man will do good, because God is goodness. The poet, informs Sidney, "doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way as will entice any man to enter into it" (Dorsten, p. 39-40). There is something Socratic about this attitude to man – if man knew good, he would do good. And who would not be moved to action by the prospect of unification with his or her maker. Subjected to this kind of reasoning, the Countess' circles of rhyme become doubly edifying in that they teach goodness and induce the same. The circles reveal God, who is good and true, and man's return to him, which consists in goodness and truthfulness.

To end this paper where I started, and in that way fulfil my duties as a public speaker, I must return to my title. The expression 'Conceit Beyond Expectation' is taken from Samuel Daniel's treatise *A Defence of Ryme* and refers to the following is applicable to Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke:

Ryme . . . hath beene so farre from hindering their [i. e. the poets'] inventions, as it hath begot conceit beyond expectation, and comparable to the best inventions in the world: for sure in an eminent spirit whom nature hath fitted for that mysterie, Ryme is no impediment to his

¹ Røstvig, p. 16.

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conceit, but rather gives him wings to mount and carries him, not out of his course, but as it were beyond his power to a farre happier flight. (Colby Sprague, p. 137-138)