
MARY (SIDNEY) HERBERT,
COUNTESS OF PEMBROKE

To the Angel Spirit of the Most Excellent Sir Philip Sidney¹

- To thee, pure sprite,^o to thee alone's addressed *spirit*
 This coupled work, by double int'rest thine:
 First raised by thy blessed hand, and what is mine
 Inspired by thee, thy secret power impressed.^o *i.e., investing her*
 5 So dared my Muse with thine itself combine,
 As mortal stuff with that which is divine.
 Thy light'ning beams give luster to the rest,
- That heaven's king may deign his own transformed
 In substance no, but superficial tire^o *attire*
 10 By thee put on; to praise, not to aspire
 To those high tones, so in themselves adorned,
 Which angels sing in their celestial choir,
 And all of tongues with soul and voice admire
 These sacred hymns thy kingly prophet² formed.
- 15 Oh, had that soul which honor brought to rest
 Too soon not left, and reft^o the world of all *deprived*
 What man could show, which we perfection call,
 This half-maimed piece had sorted^o with the best. *consorted, equaled*
 Deep wounds enlarged, long festered in their gall,
 20 Fresh bleeding smart;^o not eye- but heart-tears fall. *pain, grief*
 Ah memory, what needs this new arrest?^o *delay*
- Yet here behold (oh, wert thou to behold!)
 This^o finished now, thy matchless Muse begun, *the translation*
 The rest but pieced, as left by thee undone.
 25 Pardon (oh, blessed soul) presumption too too bold,
 If love and zeal such error ill become,³
 'Tis zealous love, love which hath never done,
 Nor can enough in world of words unfold.
- And sith^o it hath no further scope to go, *since*
 30 Nor other purpose but to honor thee,
 Thee in thy works, where all the Graces⁴ be,
 As little streams with all their all do flow
 To their great sea, due tribute's grateful fee;

1. This is the dedicatory poem to the translation of the Psalms begun by Philip Sidney and completed, after his death, by Mary.

2. The Old Testament King David, supposed author of the Psalms. Herbert says that in translating the Psalms her brother intended not to rival the originals—which angels sing and which all

those learned in ancient languages (“all of tongues”) admire—but simply to praise God.

3. I.e., if it's unbecoming for (her) love and zeal to have presumed to complete the translation.

4. The three Graces of classical mythology, goddesses who presided over all social pleasures and polite accomplishments.

So press my thoughts, my burdened thoughts, in me,
 35 To pay the debt of infinites I owe

To thy great worth. Exceeding Nature's store,[°] *abundance*
 Wonder of men, sole[°] born perfection's kind, *alone*
 Phoenix⁵ thou wert. So rare thy fairest mind,
 Heav'nly adorned, Earth justly might adore,
 40 Where truthful praise in highest glory shined,
 For there alone[°] was praise to truth confined; *i.e., in heaven*
 And where but there to live forevermore?

Oh! When to this accompt,[°] this cast-up[°] sum, *account / totaled*
 This reckoning made, this audit of my woe,
 45 I call my thoughts, whence so strange passions flow,
 How works my heart, my senses stricken dumb?
 That would thee[°] more than ever heart could show,
 And all too short:[°] who knew thee best doth know *inadequate*
 There lives no wit[°] that may thy praise become.[°] *mind / express*

50 Truth I invoke (who scorn elsewhere to move,
 Or here in aught my blood should partialize),⁷
 Truth, sacred Truth, thee sole to solemnize.
 Those precious rights well known best minds approve;
 And who but doth, hath wisdom's open eyes,
 55 Not owly blind the fairest light still flies,
 Confirm no less?⁸ At least 'tis sealed above,[°] *acknowledged in heaven*

Where thou art fixed among thy fellow lights:
 My day put out, my life in darkness cast,
 Thy angel's soul with highest angels placed
 60 There blessèd sings enjoying heav'n-delights,
 Thy maker's praise, as far from earthly taste
 As here thy works so worthily embraced
 By all of worth, where never envy bites.

As goodly buildings to some glorious end
 65 Cut off by Fate, before the Graces had
 Each wond'rous part in all their beauties clad,
 Yet so much done, as art could not amend;⁹
 So thy rare works to which no wit can add,
 In all men's eyes, which are not blindly mad,
 70 Beyond compare, above all praise extend.

Immortal monuments of thy fair fame,
 Though not complete, nor in the reach of thought,
 How on that passing peacetime would have wrought,

5. The phoenix was a mythical Arabian bird, only one of which existed at any one time. Often associated with Christ, it symbolizes unique perfection.

6. I.e., my thoughts would (if they could) praise you.

7. I scorn demonstrating partiality to my kinsman.

8. I.e., those who have the open eyes of wisdom—

are not blind like an owl always fleeing the fairest light—will confirm what I've said about Sidney's worth.

9. I.e., the part that was completed could not be improved upon; the same is true of Sidney's unfinished literary works.

Had Heav'n so spared the life of life to frame
 75 The rest?¹ But ah, such loss! Hath this world aught
 Can equal it? Or which like grievance brought?
 Yet there will live thy ever-praisèd name.

To which these dearest off'rings of my heart,
 Dissolved to ink, while pen's impressions move
 80 The bleeding veins of never-dying love,
 I render here: these wounding lines of smart,
 Sad characters indeed of simple love,
 Not art nor skill, which abler wits do prove,^o *experience*
 Of my full soul receive the meanest part.²

85 Receive these hymns,^o these obsequies^o receive: *the psalms / funeral rites*
 If any mark of thy sweet sprite appear,
 Well are they born; no title else shall bear.
 I can no more. Dear soul, I take my leave;
 Sorrow still strives, would mount thy highest sphere,
 90 Presuming so just cause might meet thee there.³
 Oh happy change, could so I take my leave!

ca. 1595

1623

Psalm 58 *Si Vere Utique*

And call ye this to utter what is just
 You that of justice hold the sovereign throne?
 And call ye this, to yield, O sons of dust,
 To wrongèd brethren every man his own?
 O no! It is your long malicious will
 Now to the world to make by practice known
 With whose oppression you the balance fill:
 Just to yourselves, indifferent¹ else to none.

But what could they, who even in birth declined
 From truth and right to lies and injuries?
 To show the venom of their cankered mind
 The adder's image scarcely can suffice;
 Nay, scarce the aspic² may with them contend,
 On whom the charmer all in vain applies
 His skilfull'st spells, aye missing of his end,
 While she, self-deaf and unaffected, lies.

Lord, crack their teeth! Lord, crush these lions' jaws!
 So let them sink as water in the sand.
 When deadly bow their aiming fury draws,

1. If heaven had spared your life so that you could have completed your representation of human life.

2. The least part—all that she, with her limitations as a writer, is able to express. Professions of a writer's inadequacy are conventional.

3. My sorrow would mount to heaven to meet

you, presuming that the justness of my cause would allow me (however personally unworthy) entrance there.

1. Impartial.

2. The asp, a small poisonous snake.

Shiver the shaft ere past the shooter's hand.
So make them melt as the dishousèd snail,
Or as the embryo whose vital band
Breaks ere it holds, and formless eyes do fail
To see the sun, though brought to lightful land.

O let their brood, a brood of springing thorns,
Be by untimely rooting overthrown;
Ere bushes waxed,³ they push with pricking horns,
As fruits yet green are oft by tempest blown.
The good with gladness this revenge shall see
And bathe his feet in blood of wicked one
While all shall say, "The just rewarded be;
There is a God that carves to each his own."

3. Grew; "pricking horns": thorns.