‘High Holy Muse’:
Christian Hebraism and Jewish Exegesis in
the Sidneian *Psalms*

Chanita Goodblatt

**Introduction**
The title of this essay is taken from a ‘Divine Poem’ written by John Donne, the renowned English 17th century poet and preacher. In this poem, entitled ‘Upon the Translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sidney, and the Countess of Pembroke his Sister’, Donne pulls taut the lines of psalmic transmission:

The songs are these, which heavens high holy Muse
Whisper’d to *David*, *David* to the Jewes:
And *Davids* Successors, in holy zeale,
In formes of joy and art doe re-reveale,²

Of the 150 Sidneian *Psalms*, Sir Philip Sidney translated the first 43 before his death in 1586; they were revised (though in a ‘relatively limited and tentative’ manner) by his sister Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, who then completed the rest by 1594.³ In these lines Donne effectively demarcates important questions of source criticism that have been at the center of critical study of the Sidneian translations. Just how, one asks, is the divinely granted Hebrew text

---

1 I would like to thank Mayer I. Gruber for his generous assistance in translating Greek and Latin texts into English, as well as for the point about ancient Semitic languages. I would also like to thank Pau Figueras for additional Latin translations, as well as Anne Lake Prescott for her invaluable comments. Translations of Hebrew texts are my own or cited with my emendations.

2 J. Donne, *Poems*, London 1635, p. 367. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century spelling and punctuation of texts have been preserved in all citations. Exceptions are the modernization in the use of: long ‘s’; i/j; u/v; the vowel-macron (a vowel with a horizontal line over it) replacing a succeeding ‘n’ or ‘m’; a superscripted ‘e’ with ‘y’ (meaning ‘the’); and a superscripted ‘c’ with ‘w’ (meaning ‘which’).

transmitted to these ‘second-generation Protestant aristocrats’, these ‘
Davids Successors’? To be more precise, how does Christian Hebraism,
the study of Jerome’s Hebraica Veritas, actually filter down ‘from
select scholars to Christendom at large, resulting in a new way of
reading the Hebrew Bible that was incorporated as well into Church
sermons and literary works’? Finally, returning to ‘the Jewes’, what is
the source (and role) of Jewish exegesis for the Sidneian interpretation
of the original, Hebrew biblical text?

J. C. A. Rathmell, editor of the first complete edition of the Sidneian
Psalms since the 19th century, has remarked that ‘one of the most
significant features of the collection lies in the way the two poets,
especially the Countess of Pembroke, attempt to reveal by an accurate
and intelligent use of the scholarly commentaries the latent meaning
of the Hebrew originals’. Discussion of this ‘feature’ both predates
and postdates Rathmell’s propitious remarks; it is engaging to return
to earlier accounts of Pembroke’s Hebrew studies:

And that as the female sex are as capable of learning this [Hebrew]
as any other language appears so plain from many undeniable
instances of it as to render any father [sic] disproof of that
assertion unnecessary. … Much more might be said upon this
head, but having said enough to prove that the Countess might
possibly understand the original, and consequently have learning
and judgment enough to give a just translation of the psalms, I
shall proceed in my short account of her [George Ballard 1752].

Lady Mary still pursued her studies with ardour, residing
sometimes in London, sometimes at Penshurst [the Sidney estate],
but perhaps more frequently at Ludlow [the family residence].
She now became acquainted, not only with the best Latin and
Greek authors, but even the Hebrew language, and thus made an


288
acquisition which can be rarely boasted of by any female, however learned [H. T. R. 1845].

These two authors are propelled by an obvious desire to prove the possibility, even probability, of Pembroke’s knowledge of Hebrew; indeed Ballard is particularly admirable in his disclosure of women’s Hebrew scholarship. Yet the editors of the most recent edition of Pembroke’s psalms justifiably circumscribe this claim when they explain: ‘In the absence of conclusive external evidence, it is impossible to ascertain whether or not Pembroke did study Hebrew. There are no references to a Hebrew tutor in the account books … nor are there Hebrew books listed for young Mary Sidney’.

A more contemporaneous and certainly more provocative statement is made by Pembroke’s cousin, Sir John Harington, when he writes:

Hee [Gervase Babington, afterwards Bishop of Worcester] was sometime Chaplaine to the late Earl of Pembrooke, whose Noble Countesse used this her Chaplaines advice, I suppose, for the translation of the Psalmes; for it was more then a womans skill to expresse the sense so right as she hath done in her verse, and more then the English or Latine translation could give her.

Responding to Harington’s curtailing of a ‘womans skill’, Margaret Hannay has justly noted that he ‘is obviously not only misogynistic but factually wrong’. Yet despite this, Harington does indeed
corroborate the skill of the Sideneian _Psalmes_ in preserving the ‘sense so right’ of the Hebrew Bible.\(^{13}\) As such, he would be obliged to agree with Hannay’s own evaluation that Pembroke ‘tends to follow the source closest to the Hebrew’,\(^{14}\) as well as with Theodore Steinberg, who has demonstrated that both she and Sidney ‘had some access either to the Hebrew language or to an accomplished “Hebrician”’.\(^{15}\)

At the present time, therefore, the dimensions of Pembroke’s Hebrew knowledge remain a conundrum. In this essay I will consequently propose a somewhat different approach, one which acknowledges Leah Marcus’s discernment of the early modern emphasis on textual

---

13 Suzanne Trill has noted that Harington asserts (in his epigrams) that Pembroke’s _Psalmes_ redeem a subject ‘rude and ruinous before’. See ‘Sixteenth-century Women’s Writing: Mary Sidney’s _Psalmes_ and the “Femininity” of Translation’, in: W. Zunder and S. Trill eds., _Writing and the English Renaissance_, London 1996, p. 149. In the complete context of this epigram Harington’s statement can, however, be understood as both laudatory and ironic. See N. E. McClure ed., _The Letters and Epigrams of Sir John Harington together with The Prayse of Private Life_, Philadelphia 1930, p. 310:

_In prayse of two worthy Translations, made by two great ladies_

My soule one only Mary doth adore,
Only one Mary doth injoy my hart;
Yet hath my Muse found out two Maryes more
That merit endless praise by dew desart;
Two Maryes that translate with divers arte
Two subjects rude and ruinous before;
Both having nobless great and bewties store,
Nobless and bewty to their works imparte;
Both have ordaynde against deaths dreafull darte
A Sheeld of fame enduring evermore.
Both works advance the love of sacred lore,
Both helpe the soules of sinners to convarte.
Their learned payn I praye, her costly almes:
A Colledge this translates, the tother Psalmes.

Who are these ‘Maryes’? The ‘Mary’ of the first two lines is certainly Harington’s wife, Mary Rogers (_Letters and Epigrams_ 11). The ‘Mary’ of the ‘Psalmes’ is identified in a manuscript version as Pembroke (_Letters and Epigrams_ 426). The ‘Mary’ of a ‘Colledge’ may well be Mary Howard, who translated ‘Certain Ingenious Sentences Collected out of Various Authors’ from Greek into Latin. See Ballard (above, n. 7), p. 146. I would like to thank Betty Travitsky for her assistance in this possible identification.


indeterminacy and intertextuality. As such, I will transmute such unresolvable issues of source criticism into a study of dialogic relationships, in which the opaqueness of the Hebrew Bible with its hermeneutic gaps will be seen as inviting interrelated philological inquiries and interpretive solutions from readers of the biblical text. Such a study providently begins with the careful, meticulous work of Beth Wynne Fisken, Rivkah Zim, Anne Lake Prescott and Margaret Hannay, who have pointed out the Christian sources most probably used for the Sidneian psalm translations. These sources can be divided into three main categories:

1. Translations of the Bible, specifically Robert Estienne's *Liber Psalmorum Davidis* with its marginal notes, the *Coverdale Psalter*, and the *Geneva Bible* with its marginal notes;
2. Commentaries on the Psalms, such as those by John Calvin and Theodore Beza.

---

18 R. Estienne, *Liber Psalmorum Davidis: Annonationis in Eosdem ex Hebraeorum Commentariis*, Paris 1546. The marginal notes, as Anne Prescott explains, were derived from the lectures given by François Vatablus (*‘Evil Tongues’,* pp. 170-171).
3. Metrical translations of the psalms, particularly the Matthew Parker Psalter\textsuperscript{23} and the highly popular Sternhold and Hopkins Psalms.\textsuperscript{24}

What is more, Seth Weiner has made visible the hitherto transparent Jewish exegetical commentaries to which, as he writes, ‘Sidney can be connected, however obliquely’.\textsuperscript{25} Such a circuitous route is described by Louis Newman, when he explains that ‘the works of Rashi, David Kimchi, Ibn Ezra and other medieval Rabbis were made available to Christian scholars … through the writings of medieval Latinists … moreover, the editions of Christian Hebraists … who compiled dictionaries, grammars and material from the commentaries placed the works of medieval Jewish exegetes at the command of non-Jewish scholars’.\textsuperscript{26} Thus it is to the Hebrew biblical commentaries of the 11th and 12th century Jewish exegetes – the Northern-French Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac), the Spanish Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Provençal Radak (Rabbi David Kimhi) – that the Christian Hebraists turned:\textsuperscript{27} Rashi because he used philology and grammar to explain the ‘eternal verities’ of the Bible;\textsuperscript{28} Ibn Ezra and Kimhi because they stressed

---

\textsuperscript{23} M. Parker, \textit{The Whole Psalter Translated into English Metre}, London 1567.

\textsuperscript{24} T. Sternhold and J. Hopkins, \textit{The Whole Book of Psalmes, Collected into English Meeter}, London 1592.


Christian Hebraism and Jewish Exegesis in the Sidneian Psalms

This intertextual, multi-lingual perspective particularly enables the study of the Sidneian Psalms as interpretative, imaginative translations of the Hebrew Bible. In discussions of selected passages from three of the Psalms – 6, 58 and 139 – I will both reflect, and reflect on, previous discussions, with the objective of integrating knowledge of Jewish exegetical sources with Christian biblical translations and commentaries. In this manner, the Sidneian Psalms can be read within the fraught dynamics of biblical hermeneutics that so characterized the early modern period.

Psa 6

The Sidneian Psalm 6 develops insect imagery in 3 out of its 8 stanzas;

[1] Lord, lett not mee, a worm, by thee be shent
   While thou art in the heate of thy displeasure:
   Ne let thy rage, of my due punishment
   Become the measure.

[6] Woe, like a Moth, my faces beautie eates,
   And age, pul’d on with paines, all freshness fretteth;
   The while a swarm of foes with vexing feates
   My life besetteth.

[8] The Lord my suite did heare, and gently heare;
   They shall be sham’d and vext, that breed my cryeng:
   And turn their backs, and straight on backs appeare
   Their shamfull flyeng.

---


30 J. C. A. Rathmell ed., The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of
Both Zim and Weiner have paid critical attention to this imagery. Zim focuses insightfully on two issues:\(^{31}\) the ‘full integration’ of such imagery into the psalm (‘worm’ of stanza one, as well as ‘moth’ and ‘swarm of foes’ in stanza 6 – to which I add ‘breed’ and ‘flyeng’ in stanza 8); and the probable source of this imagery in the Genevan notes (Table 3).\(^{32}\) Weiner widens this source criticism, astutely pointing to Kimhi\(^{33}\) as the most probable source from which Beza, and subsequently Sidney, adopted the image of the moth (Tables 2 and 3).\(^{34}\) Yet ultimately, the purpose of such criticism is to suggest the particular effect of this extended imagery; Zim particularly points out that ‘the realistic and horrifying image of the eaten face would have had a special affective power for an Elizabethan reader’.\(^{35}\) Thus the penitent speaker envisions the physical and spiritual ravages brought on by sin; in stanza 1, the image of the worm as a prostrate and groveling creature enforces his despair, while in stanzas 6 and 8 the supplicant transfers to the enemies – those ‘who in my ill rejoice’ (stanza 7) – the affective and psychological content of being attacked by an at once exasperating and overwhelming force.

Significantly, Sidney’s development of this insect imagery also has latent Christian meaning, which can be drawn out through consideration of the original, Hebrew text and the alternative exegetical traditions that it invites. The first part of verse 8 in the Hebrew Bible reads:

---

31 Zim (above, n. 3), pp. 160-164.
32 This note comprises an example, in the words of the Genevan translators, of ‘that diversitie of speache or reding which may also seme agreeable to the mynde of the holy Gost and propre for our language’. See ‘To the Reader’ (above, n. 20), p. iii.
34 Weiner (above, n. 25), p. 158. Weiner does, however, make two mistakes. First, he states that ‘the simile of the moth is in neither the Geneva Bible nor the Prayer Book’s Psalter’ (p. 157), thereby not taking the Genevan notes into consideration. Secondly, he incorrectly explains that ‘Rashi’s remarks are somewhat different [than Kimhi’s]; he does not cite Isaiah, but the moth still finds its way into his gloss’ (p. 161, n. 3); this is a misreading of Rashi’s second explanation of the root ‘ash as meaning ‘decay’.
35 Zim (above, n. 3), pp. 161-162.
Christian Hebraism and Jewish Exegesis in the Sidneian Psalms

עָשָׁה מִכַּעַס עֵינִי
asheshah mi-ka’as eyni (Geneva Bible: ‘Mine eye is dimmed for despite’; Table 3). The verb עָשָׁה asheshah literally means ‘decayed’; its adjectival form עֲשֵׁשָׁה asheishah means ‘dimmed’. In his commentary Rashi not only supplies these literal meanings (Table 1), but also the comparison (though he is mistaken about the philological connection with the Hebrew term for ‘lantern’) between weak eyesight, and the glass surrounding and dimming the lantern’s light.36

Yet a reader of the biblical text might well ask ‘how does the emotion of anger actually cause the eye’s physical decay or, by extension, dimming?’ In answer, one can point to an interpretive tradition, supported by Mayer Gruber’s explanation that the biblical expression עָשָׁה ayin means ‘my eye dries up from sadness’, referring ‘to the drying up of the eye in consequence of its running out of tears from profuse crying’.37 This tradition is evident in Calvin’s commentary, as well as in the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalms (Table 1). In both instances, there is an emphasis on the penitent speaker’s intense emotional state and its self-inflicted consequences of corporeal blindness (‘wexed dim’) – perhaps also a metaphor of spiritual blindness – that only God can heal.

Such ‘grief’ and ‘anguish’ is evident in the Sidneian speaker’s appeal not to be ‘shent’ (disgraced; stanza 1), as well as in the description of his ‘vexing’ and ‘cryeng’ (stanzas 6 and 8). What is more, attention to an alternative interpretive tradition reveals this speaker’s preoccupation with Christian images of sin. It is the idiosyncratic explanation put forth by Ibn Ezra, and subsequently copied into Kimhi (Table 2), that is the most probable source for this tradition. Turning

---

36 For a translation of Rashi’s comment see M. I. Gruber, Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms, Leiden 2004, pp. 191-192. Menahem ben Saruq was 10th century Spanish-Jewish grammarian, who composed the Hebrew dictionary Mahberet Menahem; see A. Sáenz-Badillos, ‘Early Hebraists in Spain: Menahem ben Saruq and Dunash ben Labrat’, in: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (above, n. 29), pp. 96-109. Rashi has a similar commentary on Psalm 31:10 (עָשְׁשָה בְכַעַס עֵינִי) which reads: ‘“sheshah ... it is a cognate of [the noun] “ashashit (lantern). [The expression “my eyes are wasted” refers to the situation] in which a person places a glass before his eyes to see something through the glass, [and] the appearance of that object is not clear’ (Gruber, p. 291).

to Isaiah 50:9, these Jewish exegetes explain that the word ‘asheshah is related to the Hebrew word עָשׁ 'ash, ‘worm or moth’, a meaning supported by Rashi in his explication of the term as ‘clothes worm’ (Table 2).\(^\text{38}\) It is this alternative, though philologically incorrect, tradition that finds its way into the stanzas quoted above from the Sidneian Psalomes, which expand on the imagery of an insect found only in stanza 6:8 of the Hebrew Bible.\(^\text{39}\)

This philological play on words further emphasizes those physical ravages of intense emotion, likened to the destructive action of a moth, such as developed in the notes of Estienne’s Liber Psalmorum Davidis (‘My eye has been corroded with anger as if by the clothes moth...Or, My face has become similar to a rag eaten by a moth’; Table 3) or in Beza’s metrical version, Carmine, in Psalmorum Davidis (‘Sorrow eats up my hollowed eyes like a hungry moth’; Table 3). Yet there is another meaning, suggested by the broader signification of ‘moth’ as both the larva and the adult insect,\(^\text{40}\) which appealed to the poetic and polemic imagination of Sidney’s avid admirer John Donne. In one of Donne’s sermons on the Penitential Psalm 6, there is a clear depiction of his scholarly searching for, and weighing of, different interpretations of the biblical term ‘asheshah:

For the second word [marginal note: Turbatus],\(^\text{41}\) which in our

---

\(^{38}\) In a similar manner, Zim suggests that the Genevan translation of Psalm 39:11 – ‘thou as a moth makest his beautie to consume’ (above, n. 3, p. 161) – is a source for Sidney’s translation. In both instances, however, a parallel passage does not necessarily comprise a source.

\(^{39}\) The Sidneian stanzas are translations respectively of verses 6:2, 6:8 and 6:10-11 of the Hebrew Bible. These additional verses read in the Geneva Bible (above, n. 20), pp. 237-238:

6:1: O Lord, rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chastise me in thy wrath [Hebrew Bible 6:2].
6:9-10 The Lord hath heard my petition: the Lord will receive my prayer. / All mine enemies shall be confounded & sore vexed: they shall be turned backe, and put to shame suddenly. [Hebrew Bible 6:10-11].

\(^{40}\) As the OED explains: ‘In early use the word moth seems to have been used for the larva of these insects [clothes moth]. From the 16th cent. its primarily denoted the adult, and any similar nocturnal insect, often under the misapprehension that all such insects attack clothes. The true clothes moths are now included in the family Tineidae’ (Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, 1989).

\(^{41}\) Vulgate Bible reads (Psalm 6:8): Turbatus à furore oculus meus (‘My eye is troubled for furie’). See Biblia Sacra. Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam, Paris 1927, p. 596. For the English translation, see The Holy Bible. Faithfully Translated into English, out of the Authentic Latin, by the English College of Doway,
Translators, is, in one *dimmed* [Geneva Bible], in the other *consumed* [King James], and in the Vulgate *troubled*, a great Master in the Originall [marginal note: Reuchlin] renders it well, elegantly, and naturally out of the Originall, *Verminavit* [it is covered with worms], *Tineavit* [it is covered with moths], which is such a deformitie, as wormes make in wood, or in books; If Davids sorrow for his sinnes brought him to this deformitie, what sorrow doe they owe to their sinnes, who being come to a deformitie by their own licentiousnesse, and intemperance, disguise all that by unnatural helpes, to the drawing in of others, and the continuation of their former sinnes? … And against this Vermination, (as the Originall denotes) against this gnawing of the worme, that may bore through, and sink the strongest vessel that sailes in the seas of this world, there is no other varnish, no other liniment, no other medicament, no other pitch nor rosin against this worme, but the bloud of Christ Jesus: And therefore whencesoever this worme, this apprehension of Gods future indignation, reserved for the Judgement, bites upon thee, be sure to present to it the bloud of thy Saviour: Never consider the judgement of God for sin alone, but in the company of the mercies of Christ. It is but the hissing of the Serpent, and the whispering of Satan, when he surprises thee in a melancholy midnight of dejection of spirit, and layes thy sins before thee then.  

Donne’s preaching on the biblical term makes direct reference to Johannes Reuchlin’s pioneering work on the Hebrew language, and indeed develops Reuchlin’s explication of the Hebrew word ‘ash (Table 3), found in both his Hebrew grammar and lexicon, *De Rudimentis Hebraicis* (‘Concerning the Fundamentals of Hebrew’) and the accompanying *In Septem Psalmos Poenitentiales* (‘On the Seven
Expanding on Reuchlin’s image of the worm and its physical ravaging, the Protestant preacher establishes a continuously transforming series of comparisons and metaphoric assertions (a deformitie [in the eye] as wormes make in wood; worme, this apprehension; worme bites upon thee; it is the hissing of the serpent; it is the whispering of Satan), to remind his audience of their sins and their dependence upon Christ for salvation.

Donne’s intensification of sin as ‘licentiousnesse’, ‘intemperance’ and ‘the drawing in of others’ is not surprisingly accompanied by an intensification of language’s performative power. For he animates the sinner’s psychological processes by transmuting the worm’s bite into the ‘hissing of the Serpent’ and the ‘whispering of Satan’, these speech acts thus becoming a metaphorical and fantastic representation of a Christian’s psychological surrender to melancholy and dejection. Moreover, Donne’s prefiguring of Milton’s post-Fall Satan, as speaking only in ‘hiss for hiss return’d with forked tongue to forked tongue’, creates a density of meaning for Sidney’s psalm. An awareness of such intertextuality therefore resets Sidney’s image of the worm to include the image of Satan as serpent, while the nature of the psalmic speaker’s sin becomes distinctly tainted with the implications of the temptation and fall. This is appropriate for a psalm that is, in the Christian tradition, the first of the seven Penitential Psalms, traditionally associated with David’s sin of sexual transgression with Bathsheba. Recognition of Sidney’s exegetical choice thus not only marks out his participation in a specific interpretive tradition, but also generates a consideration of the nature and imaging of sin underlying the psalmic speaker’s appeal to God, ‘Mercy, O mercy, Lord for mercies sake’ (stanza 4).


Psalms 58 and 139

Two passages in Psalms 58 and 139 have evoked considerable interest in scholars of the Sidneian translations. This is because they are taken as evidence of Pembroke’s ‘devotional meditation’ on the biblical text, which derives its force ‘from her sense of personal involvement’ and ‘immediacy’, particularly her own experience of pregnancy, possible miscarriage (or still birth) and the loss of her young daughter. In her translation of Psalm 58, Pembroke deftly expands the biblical injunction, calling down from God a cursed fate for those who, in her words, ‘declin’d / from truth and right to lies and injuries’ (stanza 2):

[3] so make them melt as the dishowed snails
or as the Embrio, whose vitall band
breakes er it holdes, and formlesse eyes doe faile
to see the sunn, though brought to lightfull land.

The Hebrew verse 58:9 reads: נפֶל אֵשֶׁת בַּל-חָז nephel eishet bal-hazu שamesh (Geneva Bible 58:8: the untimely frute of a woman, that hathe not sene the sunne). The central philological problem lies in the phrase nephel eishet, composed unusually of two nouns in the construct, genitive form: correctly, nephel ‘something fallen [of; belonging to]’; and uncommonly, eishet, ‘a woman [of; belonging to]’. There is clear evidence of two interpretive traditions, generated by the existence of homonyms in ancient Semitic languages. The one tradition – in which the pre-Reformation Bibles follow the Greek Septuagint – assumes that the construct form eishet is derived from the Semitic word ishatu ‘fire’ (in Hebrew, eish). Drawing out the thematic implications of this philological decision, the International Critical Commentary explains that this is ‘the fire of the

47 Rathmell (above, n. 6), pp. xx-xxi.
49 The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert (above, n. 9), Vol. 2, pp. 61-62.
divine anger; the lightning suddenly descends from heaven upon these wicked judges, they are instantaneously consumed, never more will they see the sunlight.53

There is, however, an alternative interpretive tradition, which adds the intimation of personal suffering and unfulfilled hopes to the destructive force of divine justice. This is the explication of the construct form *eishet* as deriving from the Semitic word *ashatu* ‘woman’ (in Hebrew *ishah*). Proposed by Rashi, adopted by Kimhi (Table 5) and found in the Reformation texts (Table 6), *nephel eishet* consequently is understood as ‘a woman’s aborted fetus’. The audacity of this tradition can be seen in the subsequent comment from the *International Critical Commentary*, in which it is explained that ‘the propriety of comparing such strong vigorous enemies with a premature birth of a child already dead, and never really alive, may be questioned’.54

It is this contested tradition that we find in Pembroke. Within the intertextual complex of responses to this biblical phrase, Pembroke is remarkable in her concern for anatomical detail. In her description of the embryo’s ‘formless eyes’ she enhances Kimhi’s description of the hidden, covered snail and aborted fetus (Table 5). Furthermore, she makes vivid the ‘untymely fruite’ used by Calvin and Coverdale (Table 6), by dwelling on the ripping of the ‘vitall band’ – the placenta and umbilical cord – with its intimations of blood and pain. Pembroke’s particular response to the interpretive potentialities that exist within the biblical text are thereby made more distinctive, as she both follows the Reformation texts and responds to the interpretive tradition that echoes her own personal experiences.

Such interpretive potentialities inspire – in Pembroke’s translation of Psalm 139:15 – what Fisken has called ‘one of Mary Sidney’s strongest, most arresting stanzas’ [stanza 8], in which ‘the development of the fetus is used as an image of the conflation of spiritual and physical growth’.55 When read together with its preceding stanza, Pembroke’s unique expansion of biblical imagery is revealed:

54 Briggs and Briggs, p. 45.
55 Fisken (above, n. 17), p. 177.
Christian Hebraism and Jewish Exegesis in the Sidneian Psalms

[7] Each inmost piece in me is thine:
while yet I in my mother dwelt,
all that me cladd
from thee I had.
thou in my frame hast strangely delt;
needs in my praise thy works must shine
so inly them my thoughts have felt.

[8] Thou, how my back was beam-wise laid,
and rafting of my ribs dost know:
know’st ev’ry point
of bone and joynt,
how to this whole these partes did grow,
in brave embrody faire araid,
though wrought in shopp both dark and low.56

Pembroke’s imagery has its source in the biblical text, which reads in Hebrew: לֹא–נִכְחַד עָצְמִי מִמֶךָּ אֲשֶׁר-עֻשֵּׂיתִי בַסֵּתֶר רֻקַּמְתִּי בְּתַחְתִּיוֹת אָרֶץ
–
Lo-nikhad 'atsmi mi-meka, asher 'useiti va-seter, ruqamti be-tahtiyot arets
(Geneva Bible: My bones are not hid from thee, though I was made in a secret place, & facioned beneth in the earth; Table 7). The parallel parts of this verse describe the speaker’s formation, sustaining the image of man made, in Genesis, ‘of the dust of the grounde’.57 It is Rashi – clearly echoed in the Genevan notes (Table 7) – who emphasizes the sexual, biological aspect of human creation by explicating the opaque, even metaphorical, phrases ‘useiti va-seter (I was made in a secret place) and be-tahtiyot arets (in the recesses of the earth) as respectively ‘intercourse’ and ‘womb’. In so doing, Rashi also reinforces the psalmic speaker’s previous description of himself as being covered בְּבֶטֶן אִמִּי be-veten imi, ‘in my mother’s womb’ from verse 13.

In this biblical description of human creation, the incongruous juxtaposition of the semantically neutral verb ‘useiti, ‘I was made’ with the metaphorical ruqamti, ‘I was embroidered’ invites Kimhi’s commentary; this Jewish exegete emphasizes the intense exertion,58 as

56 Pembroke (above, n. 49), p. 235.
57 Geneva Bible (above, n. 20), p. 1b.
58 Kimhi bases his explication on a homonymic relationship between the root of
well as the great artistic skill and marvelous results of human creation (Table 8). Indeed, Kimhi’s detailed comparison of the ‘process of creation in sinews, bones, flesh and skin’ to the process of embroidery – echoed in the translations by Parker and Beza (Table 8) – points to the biblical metaphor’s ‘yoking by violence together’ (in Samuel Johnson’s terms) of ‘heterogeneous ideas’ (in this case, of human creation and domestic craft), which characterizes the metaphysical conceit.\(^{59}\)

This mention of the conceit owes much to Hannibal Hamlin’s insightful comment on the ‘metaphysical’ quality of Pembroke’s translation.\(^{60}\) Her metaphoric elaboration on the biblical comparison between embryonic development and human handicrafts (embroidery, weaving) becomes even more vivid when juxtaposed with Calvin’s commentary, seen as a main source for her translation.\(^{61}\)

Afterwarde hee [David] compareth oure mothers wombe too the nethermoste caves and cabins of the earthe … GOD without the healpe of any light, fashyoneth the perfectest of all woorkes, (that is too wit Manne) in his mothers wombe. And the woorde Rakam whiche figuryeth to weave toogither, maketh muche to the enlargyng of the matter. For it is not too bee doubted, but that David mente too expresse metaphorically the inestimable woorkmanshypp whiche appeareth in the shape of mannes bodye … What Phrygian [augurs or diviners] coulde with his cunning & sharpe wit, atteyne to the hundredth parte of thys so manifold and variable webbe?\(^{62}\)

---


Calvin takes careful pains not to elide the literal meaning of the word *raqam*, ‘embroider’, very clearly echoing and integrating the commentaries of Rashi and Kimhi; particularly found in this passage are Rashi’s ‘womb’ as ‘nethermoste caves and cabins’, as well as Kimhi’s embroidery as a ‘manifold and variable webbe’. Building on this attention to the *Hebraica veritas*, Pembroke too can be seen to integrate the biological, artistic and (as Fisken has noted)63 mechanical aspects of human creation. She does so by developing a highly detailed series of metaphors that describe embryonic development in terms of the various activities involved in producing cloth and needlework (‘all that me cladd,’ ‘beam-wise laid,’ ‘raftering rib’, ‘embrod’ry aire araid’) – ultimately confirming God as artisan in the ‘shopp’ that is the womb. Pembroke’s extended and integrative treatment raises interesting semantic potentialities: suggestions of her own experience of pregnancy; the joining of domestic industry to Godly works; the joining of the human and the divine in sexual creation and birth; and the impacting of developing science in early modern England. What is more, it provides a further example of the intertextual links among Jewish and Christian exegetical texts, which reverberate with the varied meanings opened up in this instance by the juxtaposition of opaque terms and vivid imagery in the Hebrew Bible.

**Conclusion**

The Sidneian *Psalmes* were first published in the mid-nineteenth century, the time of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*’s essay on Pembroke, and the time from which the engraving of Pembroke’s portrait dates.64 All signal a renewed interest in these metrical compositions, particularly in Pembroke’s work as editor of Sidney and predominant translator. What especially fascinates a great deal of the present-day scholarlywork on the *Psalmes* is the way in which they incorporate contemporaneous biblical commentaries and translations, ultimately making them partners in the reading and mediation of the Hebrew Bible in England of the 16th and 17th centuries. What is equally fascinating

63 Fisken (above, n. 17), p. 178.
64 The edition of the *Psalmes* was published in 1823; see Rathmell (above, n. 6), p. xi. The engraving dates from 1824; by permission of the Bollos Collection, Digital Collections and Archives, Tufts University.
MARY SIDNEY,
COUNTESS OF PEMBROKE.
OB: 1621.
is the way in which these varied Christian texts echo both the meaning and actual phrasing of Jewish exegetical commentaries. Yet before becoming entangled in the search for direct and indirect sources, one would do well to take heed of David Daiches’s statement about the *King James Bible*, when he writes that ‘it is this wealth of possible sources for the rendering of any given difficult passage which makes any definite conclusions about A.V. [Authorized Version] sources impossible – at least impossible without a painstaking textual collation which no individual could hope to achieve in a lifetime’.65 To patently make use of the biblical metaphor from Psalm 139, it would be best to re-envision source criticism as a complex web of intertextuality. The reader of the Sidneian *Psalmes* can thus perceive the filaments – sometimes single and sometimes interwoven – which are drawn out from the semantically opaque and metaphorically-laden text of the Hebrew Bible, to be ultimately woven together into a complex interpretive and poetic text. In this way, these *Psalmes* become themselves embodiments of Donne’s ‘formes of joy and art’, Kimhi’s ‘manifold patterns and interwoven designs’, and Calvin’s ‘manifold and variable webbe’.

65 D. Daiches (above, n. 27), p. 173.
Table 1: Psalm 6:8

ע”שאה as ‘Dimmed’

Rashi

ע”שאה (It becomes glassy) is a cognate of [the noun] ע”שהית [lanterne in O.F.]. [The psalmist speaks of] an eye, whose perception of light is weak so that it seems to him [the person whose eye is here described] that he is looking through [foggy] glass, which is [placed] before his eye. And Menahem [ben Saruq] explained it as meaning ‘decay’, as in ע”תעם ע”שיהו [‘my bones decayed’; Psalm 31:11] (Biblia Rabbinica, Vol. 4, p. 7; Gruber, Rashi’s Commentary, p. 191).

Calvin, Psalms

As towching the woordes, he sayth that his eye wexed dim, because the greef of the mynd dooth bothe easly perce unto the eyes, and from thence moste chiefly utter it self (part 1, folio 18).

Sternhold and Hopkins, Psalms [6:7]

My sight is dim and waxeth old, with anguish of mine heart: For feare of those that are my foes, and would my soule subvert (p. 9).

Table 2: Psalm 6:8

ע”שאה as ‘Worm’: Jewish Sources

Ibn Ezra

ע”שאה. A cognate of [the noun ע”ש meaning ‘moth’ in] ‘the moth will consume them’ [Isaiah 50:9] (Biblia Rabbinica, Vol. 4, p. 7).

Kimhi

ע”שאה. A cognate of [the noun ע”ש meaning ‘moth’ in] ‘the moth will consume them’ [Isaiah 50:9], as if he had said ‘decayed’ (Complete Commentary, p. 21).

Rashi, Isaiah 50:9

Rashi. ע”ש [‘mothe’]. The clothes worm (Biblia Rabbinica, Vol. 2, p. 79).
Table 3: Psalm 6:8

‘Asheshah as ‘Worm’: Christian Sources

Reuchlin [6:7]

_De Rudimentis Hebraicis:_ עַשַׁשׁ Tinea. Vermis. [Moth larva. Worm].
_In Septem Psalmos Poenitentiales:_ Vermanivit ex iracundia species me inveteravit in omnibus tribulantibus me.
[My face became wormy because of anger; it grew old because of all my troubles].

Estienne. _Liber Psalmorum Davidis_

Heb. ... Veluti à tineis corrosus est prae indignatione oculus meus...Vel, Facies mea similis facta est panno à tineis corroso.
[My eye has been corroded with anger as if by the clothes moth...Or, My face has become similar to a rag eaten by a moth].

Geneva Bible [6:7]

Mine eye is dimmed for despite, & sunke in because of all mine enemies.

* Or, mine eye is eaten as it were with wormes (p. 236a).


Mea en lumina mœrore excavata / Exedit tineæ voracis instar, / Et tanquam arida iam premat senectus / Absorpto pereunt liquore ocelli, / Obsesso innumera hostium caterva (pp. 17-18).
[Sorrow eats up my hollowed eyes like a hungry moth / Even as a parched old age oppresses them, / My eyes waste away, swamped by tears, / Choked by the numberless troops of my enemies; Trans. Weiner, p. 158)].

Table 4: Psalm 58:9

_Eishet as ‘Fire’_

Semitic Languages


Septuagint Bible [57:9]

epepese pur kai ouk eidon ton hellion. a fire fell, and they did not see the sun.

Vulgate Bible [57:9]

Superccecidit ignis et non viderunt solem (p. 596).
**Table 5: Psalm 58:9**

*Eishet* as ‘Woman’s Stillbirth’: Jewish Sources

**Semitic Languages**

*Woman’s Stillbirth*, Ugaritic and Akkadian: The word for woman is *ashatu*. Hebrew: The word for woman is *ishah*, or here in Psalm 58 *eishet* (which is the form attested to also in Phoenician).

**Rashi**


**Kimhi**

*The Falling of an Eishet shall not see the sun*: They will be like a woman’s aborted fetus, because both this [the snail] and this [the fetus] did not see the sun; the snail because it covers itself within its shell, which is like clothing for it, and so the aborted fetus as is said [Job 3:16] ‘as infants, which have not sene the light’ (*Complete Commentary*, p. 131).

**Table 6: Psalm 58:9**

*Eishet* as ‘Woman’s Stillbirth’: Christian Sources

**Calvin. Psalms**

The same reason is of the untymely frute: for if wee consider how much tyme they [the ungoldy] waste in wanhope, wee shall easily believe, that before they begin to live, the be drawen backe as it were from the verye barryers (part 1, folio 224).

**Coverdale. Psalter [58:8]**

Let them consume away lyke a snaile and be lyke the untymely fruite of a woman: and let them not se the sunne.
Sternhold and Hopkins. *Psalmes* [58:8]
As snailes doe waste within the shell, / and into slime doe runne: / As one before his time that fell / and never saw the sunne (p. 117).

**Table 7: Psalm 139:15**

**Place of Creation**

**Rashi**

*I was made in a hidden place*; by means of intercourse.

*In the recesses pf the earth: [i.e.,] in the lowest [of the three] compartment[s] of my mother’s womb* (Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary*, p. 733).

**Geneva Bible**

My bones are not hid from thee, thogh I was made in a secret place, & facionedk beneth in the earth.

k That is, in my mothers wombe, which he compareth to the inward partes of the earth (p. 265a).

**Table 8: Psalm 139:15**

**Process of Creation**

**Kimhi**

The meaning of *I was made* [*useiti*] is to be interpreted on the analogy of *‘isu* in [the text] ‘their virgin breasts were pressed’ [Ezekiel 23:3] which has the sense of crushing and pressing. … He says *I was fashioned*, he compares the process of creation in sinews, bones, flesh and skin to embroidery work because it is [wrought] in manifold patterns and interwoven designs (*Complete Commentary*, p. 303; *Commentary*, pp. 97-99).

**Parker. Psalter**

My substance first: both bones & joints: were nothing hid fro the / In earth ful depe when I was wrought: and woven was curiously (p. 401).

**Beza. Psalmes**

Even then the joining of my bones was knowne unto thee, when I was formed in so secret a place, and was fashioned in the darke cave, as it were with needle worke (p. 336).

309