



DELPHI  
CLASSICS

Mary Sidney

Complete Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

# DELPHI POETS SERIES

## Mary Sidney

(1561-1621)



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Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

**Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke**



*By Delphi Classics, 2023*

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*Mary Sidney - Delphi Poets Series*

First published in the United Kingdom in 2023 by Delphi Classics.

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ISBN: 978 1 80170 136 5

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

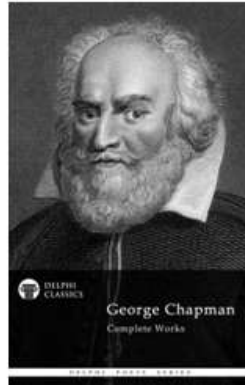
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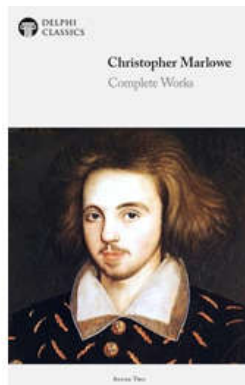
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## NOTE



When reading poetry on an eReader, it is advisable to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines of poetry to display correctly.



## The Life and Poetry of Mary Sidney



*Bewdley, a town in Worcestershire — the birthplace of Mary Sidney. She was born on 27 October 1561 at Tickenhill Palace.*



*Dr Stukeley's sketch of the remains of Tickenhill House, 1738 — Mary Sidney's birthplace*





*The poet's father: Sir Henry Sidney by Arnold Bronckorst, 1573*



*The poet's mother: Mary Dudley, Lady Sidney by Hans Eworth, c. 1555*

## Brief Introduction: Mary Sidney



The most important non-royal woman writer and patron of Elizabethan England, Mary Sidney was the daughter of Sir Henry Sidney and Mary Dudley. She was born on 27 October 1561 at Tickenhall near Bewdley, Worcestershire, on the Welsh border while her father was serving as Lord Governor of the marches of Wales. Her mother, a well-educated woman and close friend of Queen Elizabeth, was the daughter of the Earl of Northumberland, who was virtual ruler of England in King Edward's final years, and she was the sister of Elizabeth's favorite, Robert Dudley. Lady Sidney was badly scarred by smallpox after nursing the queen and so she rarely appeared at court.

While her brothers, Philip, Robert and Thomas, were preparing to go to university, Mary and her younger sister, Ambrosia, received an excellent education for women of their time, including training in Latin, French, Italian and literature, as well as more typically feminine subjects such as needlework, lute playing and singing. After Ambrosia died in 1575, Queen Elizabeth invited the Sidneys to send Mary to court, away from the 'unpleasant air' of Wales.

At the age of fifteen, Mary became the third wife of Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, one of the wealthiest men in England and an important ally of her father and her uncle, the Earl of Leicester. She quickly grew into her role as Countess of Pembroke. As mistress of the primary Pembroke estate at Wilton, her London home Baynards Castle, and several smaller estates, she encouraged literary and scientific endeavours among her circle and household. Between 1580 and 1584, she gave birth to four children: Katherine, who died in childhood; Anne, who died in her early twenties; William, who became the third Earl of Pembroke; and Philip, whom King James created Earl of Montgomery and who eventually succeeded his brother as fourth Earl of Pembroke. Interestingly, her sons were the "Incomparable Pair of Brethren" to whom Shakespeare's *First Folio* was dedicated.

Mary Sidney began her writing career in the late 1580's, after her children were out of infancy and after she had experienced an upsetting series of deaths in her family. Her three-year-old daughter Katherine died in 1584 on the same day her son Philip was born. The death of her father in May 1586 was quickly followed by her mother's death a couple of months later. In the autumn, while seriously ill herself, she learned that her brother Philip, a celebrated poet, died on 17 October from infection of a wound received at Zutphen. All England and Holland mourned his death; several collections of elegies and his splendid funeral helped to establish the Sidney legend. Overwhelmed by illness and grief, while fearing invasion by the Spanish Armada, Mary remained in the country for two years.

In November 1588, she returned to London in a splendid procession, and began to honour her brother by her activities as patron, translator and writer. The stream of elegies for Sir Philip had dried up quickly after the death of the Earl of Leicester, who had rewarded those that honoured his nephew. So Mary Sidney stepped into that role, encouraging a second wave of elegies. Her first known literary work, *The Doleful Lay of Clorinda*, was published in 1595 with Edmund Spenser's *Astrophel* in a collection of elegies. Although some critics have attributed the poem to Spenser, evidence of her authorship includes her 1594 letter to Philip Sidney's friend Sir Edward Wotton, asking for his copy of a poem of mourning that she had written long ago and now needed.

She next turned to translation work. She was particularly bold as a female writer by publishing under her own name, an unusual action for an aristocratic woman. Like her brother Philip, she was profoundly influenced by Continental writers and sought to bring European literary forms and themes to England. Two translations from the French, *A Discourse of Life and Death* by Philippe de Mornay and the closet drama *Antonius* by Robert Garnier, were published together in 1592. Sidney's translation of *Marc Antoine* was among the first English dramas in blank verse, helping introduce the Continental vogue for using historical drama to comment on contemporary politics. Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1606) was directly influenced by Sidney's *Antonius*.

Mary Sidney also translated from the Italian of Petrarch's *The Triumph of Death* (1470), preserving the original *terza rima* form. This text offers consolation to the bereaved, allowing the author to interject a female voice into the Petrarchan tradition. The spirit of Laura eloquently describes the experience of death, the joy of heaven and her love for Petrarch. Even though the original was written by a male author, Mary Sidney's vibrant and eloquent Laura provided an entry into the genre of love poetry for English women.

In the early 1590's, while completing her Petrarch translation, Sidney had begun the work for which she is now best known — a metric translation of Psalms 44-150, completing a project that her brother Philip had started in his final years. Though the *Psalms* have always been an important part of Christian worship, translating them into the vernacular for private meditation, as well as public singing, had become a particularly Protestant activity in the sixteenth century. When the countess started her metric versions, she remained fairly close to the phrasing and interpretation familiar to her from Miles Coverdale's prose version in the Great Bible, incorporated into the *Book of Common Prayer*. Favouring Protestant scholarship based on the original Hebrew, Sidney revised her *Psalms* to be closer to the Geneva Bible than to the Great Bible, with considerable reliance on Théodore de Bèze, John Calvin and on *Les Psaumes de David mis en rime Françoisse, par Clément Marot, et Théodore de Bèze* (1562).

For the 107 psalms she translated, Sidney employed 128 different verse forms, rendering her achievement significant for metrical variety, as well as for its content. She uses the *Psalms* to comment on contemporary politics, particularly the persecution of "the godly," as Protestants called themselves. By expanding metaphors and descriptions present in the original Hebrew, Sidney also incorporated her experience at Elizabeth's court, as well as female experiences of marriage and childbirth. The *Psalms* were completed by 1599. Their influence on the later religious poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and John Milton has been critically recognised since Louis Martz placed the text at the start of a developing tradition of seventeenth-century devotional lyricism.

Sidney also wrote a panegyric poem in praise of Queen Elizabeth titled *A Dialogue between Two Shepherds, Thenot and Piers*. It was intended for presentation during the Queen's visit to one of the Pembroke estates, most likely the visit to Wilton planned for August 1599. Employing the familiar form of pastoral dialogue, Sidney adapts the conventions of the encomium to question the adequacy of language. Platonic Thenot debates the nature of poetic language, while the Protestant Piers claims that one need only tell the truth plainly. The poet was particularly anxious to please the queen at this time, as she was seeking a suitable position at court for her eldest son, William, a teenager ready to commence his public career. An obsequious letter written in January 1601 gives the queen even more extravagant praise.

The poet certainly had need of the Elizabeth's favor. The Earl of Pembroke, a man in his late sixties struggling against serious illness, was drawing near death. William would not come of age until April 1601, leaving Sidney, her children and all the Pembroke property vulnerable to the Court of Wards. Pembroke died on 19 January 1601. Instead of comforting his mother, young William added to her problems when he seduced and abandoned Mary Fitton, one of the queen's Maids of Honour. By refusing to marry his pregnant mistress, he incurred Elizabeth's anger and spoilt a promising career. Although he was finally released from Fleet Prison on grounds that his health was failing, William was not able to obtain a suitable position at court until the queen died and James came to the throne. It is believed that the mother and son were estranged for several years after these events.

From 1608 to 1614 a gap remains in the records of the poet's life. From 1614 through 1616, we have detailed accounts of her journey to the fashionable continental resort of Spa and her amusements there. By that time, her son William had matured into a leader of the anti-Spanish party at court, while Philip had become one of James I's favourites. This would imply that she had left politics to her sons. Her role as literary patron had also been assumed by her sons; only a few writers, such as her old friends Samuel Daniel and Sir John Davies, continued to dedicate works to her. Her religious and political activities of the past were apparently replaced by amusements, that included shooting pistols with the Countess of Barlemont, taking tobacco, playing cards, dancing and flirting with her handsome doctor, Sir Matthew Lister. This late romance may be reflected in the courtship of Simena and Lissius in Lady Wroth's pastoral drama *Love's Victory*. Letters attributed to Mary Sidney by John Donne the Younger indicate that she continued to write and to exchange manuscripts with friends, though these works have been lost.

Her final years seem to have been peaceful and happy. Reconciled with her sons, she presided over local society in Bedfordshire, fiercely protected her property through legal suits and she continued to enjoy the company of Sir Matthew Lister. Sidney also maintained a London home and occasionally took part in court activities, such as attending the funeral of Queen Anne in 1619. As mother of the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, she was honoured by the king, who visited her at Houghton House in July 1621. She died from smallpox at her home on Aldersgate Street in London on 25 September 1621 and was buried under the choir steps of Salisbury Cathedral with her husband and sons.

Without appearing to contravene the strictures against women's writing, Sidney had evaded criticism by focusing on religious themes and confining her work to the genres deemed appropriate to women: translation, dedication, elegy and encomium. Significant to her success was her identity as the sister of Sir Philip Sidney. She began her public literary career after his death by encouraging elegies written in his praise, publishing his works and completing his translation of the *Psalms*. Save for some business correspondence, all of her extant works were completed in the 1590's. Later references indicate that she continued writing and translating until her death, but all subsequent works have been lost, probably to fire, as her primary residences of Wilton and Baynards Castle were badly burned in the seventeenth century.

Her poetic epitaph, ascribed to Ben Jonson, but more likely to have been written in an earlier form by the poets William Browne and her son William, summarises how she was regarded in her own day:

*Underneath this sable hearse,  
Lies the subject of all verse,  
Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother.*



*Death, ere thou hast slain another  
Fair and learned and good as she,  
Time shall throw a dart at thee.*

Her literary talents and family connections to Shakespeare have caused Sidney to be nominated as one of the many claimants as the true author of the works of William Shakespeare in the Shakespeare authorship question. Indeed, she was so renowned in her time that one seventeenth-century manuscript identifies Sir Philip as “brother to the Countess of Pembroke”. However, her reputation suffered a subsequent decline, reducing her to a shadow of her brother. Her works were either dismissed as worthless or attributed to male writers. The process of re-evaluating her literary achievements was begun by Frances B. Young in her 1912 biography, and continued by such scholars as John Rathmell, Coburn Freer, Gary Waller, Mary Ellen Lamb, Michael G. Brennan, Noel J. Kinnamon, Barbara Lewalski, Beth Wynne Fisker and Susanne Woods. Today, Mary Sidney is rightfully recognised as the most important literary woman of her generation, who helped to open up possibilities for other women writers.



*The poet's famous brother, Sir Philip Sidney, after Antonis Mor, National Portrait Gallery, London, c. 1578*

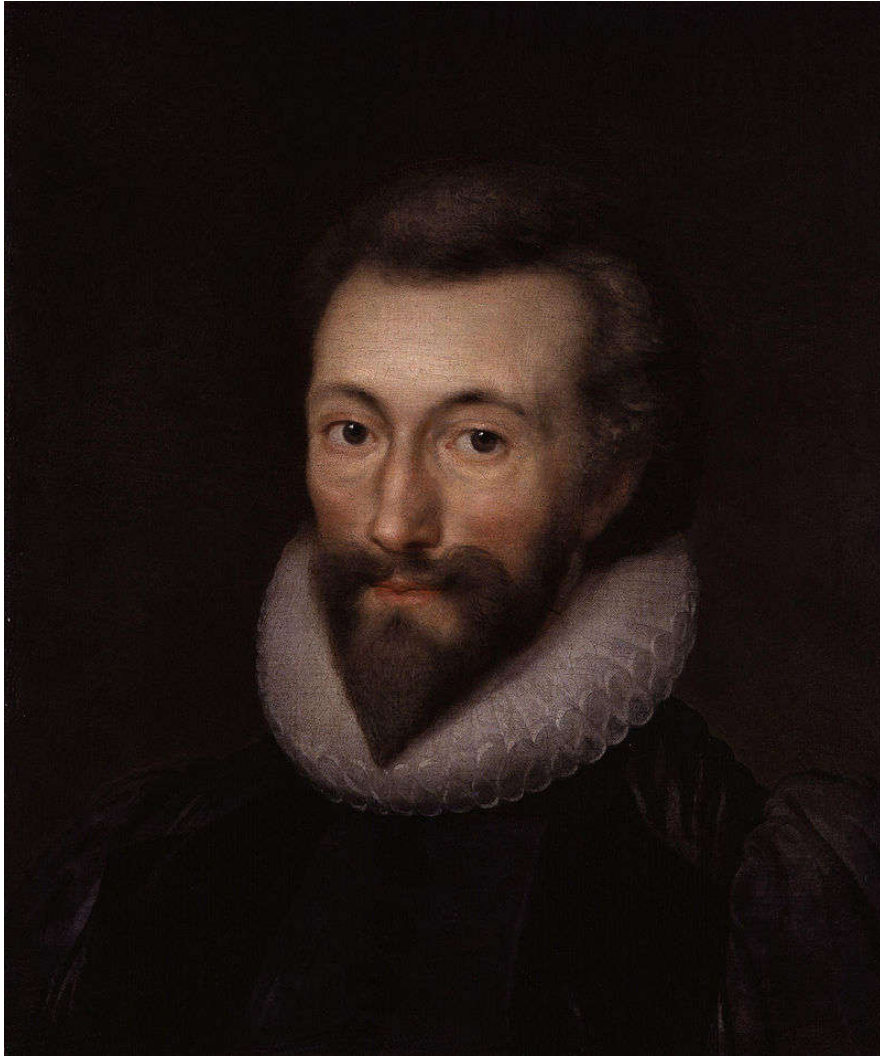


*In 1577, Mary Sidney married Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke (1538-1601), a close ally of her family. The marriage was arranged by her father in concert with her uncle, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester.*



*Matthew Lister (died 1657) was a physician to the English royal family and is known for his relationship with the Countess of Pembroke. She travelled with her doctor to Spa, Belgium in 1616. There is conjecture that she married Lister, but no evidence of this survives.*





*John Donne by Isaac Oliver, 1616 — the famous metaphysical poet was just one of Sidney's many literary admirers*





*Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke by E. Bocquet, c. 1800*

## A Dialogue between Two Shepherds, Thenot and Piers (1595)



*A Dialogue between two shepherds, Thenot and Piers, in praise of ASTREA, made by the excellent Lady, the Lady Mary Countess of Pembroke at the Queen's Majesty's being at her house at — , Anno 15 — .*

THENOT.

I sing divine ASTREA'S praise,  
O Muses! help my wits to raise,  
And heave my Verses higher.

PIERS.

Thou need'st the truth but plainly tell,  
Which much I doubt thou canst not well,  
Thou art so oft a liar.

THENOT.

If in my Song no more I show,  
Than Heav'n, and Earth, and Sea do know,  
Then truly I have spoken.

PIERS.

Sufficeth not no more to name,  
But being no less, the like, the same,  
Else laws of truth be broken.

THENOT.

Then say, she is so good, so fair,  
With all the earth she may compare,  
Not Momus self denying.

PIERS.

Compare may think where likeness holds,  
Nought like to her the earth enfolds,  
I lookt to find you lying.

THENOT.

ASTREA sees with Wisdom's sight,  
ASTREA works by Virtue's might,  
And jointly both do stay in her.

PIERS.

Nay take from them, her hand, her mind,  
The one is lame, the other blind  
Shall still you lying stain her?

THENOT.

Soon as ASTREA shows her face,  
Straight every ill avoids the place,  
And every good aboundeth.

PIERS.

Nay long before her face doth show,  
The last doth come, the first doth go,  
How loud this lie resoundeth!

THENOT.

ASTREA is our chiefest joy,  
Our chiefest guard against annoy,  
Our chiefest wealth, our treasure,

PIERS.

Where chiefest are, there others be,  
To us none else, but only she;  
When wilt thou speak in measure?

THENOT.

ASTREA may be justly said,  
A field in flow'ry robe arrayed,  
In season freshly springing.

PIERS.

That Spring endures but shortest time,  
This never leaves *Astrea's* clime,  
Thou liest, instead of singing.

THENOT.

As heavenly light that guides the day,  
Right so doth thine each lovely ray,  
That from *Astrea* flyeth.

PIERS.

Nay, darkness oft that light enclouds,  
*Astrea's* beam no darkness shrowds;  
How loudly *Thenot* lieth!

THENOT.

ASTREA rightly term I may,  
A manly Palm, a maiden Bay,  
Her verdure never dying.

PIERS.

Palm oft is crooked, Bay is low,  
She still upright, still high doth grow,  
Good *Thenot* leave thy lying.

THENOT.

Then *Piers*, of friendship tell me why,  
My meaning true, my words should lye,  
And strive in vain to raise her?

PIERS.

Words from conceit do only rise,  
Above conceit her honor flies,  
But silence, nought can praise her.

## The Dolefull Lay of Clorinda (1595)



*An elegy composed on the death of the author's brother, Sir Philip Sidney, who died at the battle of Zutphen.*

AY me, to whom shall I my case complaine?  
That may compassion my impatient grieffe?  
Or where shall I unfold my inward paine,  
That my enriuen heart may find reliefe?  
Shall I vnto the heauenly powres it show? 5  
Or unto earthly men that dwell below?

To heauens? ah they alas the authors were,  
And workers of my vnremedied wo:  
For they foresee what to vs happens here,  
And they foresaw, yet suffred this be so. 10  
    From them comes good, from them comes also il  
    That which they made, who can them warne to spill.

To men? ah, they alas like wretched bee,  
And subiect to the heauens ordinance:  
Bound to abide what euer they decree, 15  
Their best redresse, is their best sufferance.  
    How then can they like wretched comfort mee,  
    The which no lesse, need comforted to bee?

Then to my selfe will I my sorrow mourne,  
Sith none alieue like sorrowfull remaines: 20  
And to my selfe my plaints shall back retourne,  
To pay their vsury with doubled paines.  
    The woods, the hills, the riuers shall resound  
    The mournfull accent of my sorrowes ground.

Woods, hills and riuers, now are desolate, 25  
Sith he is gone the which them all did grace:  
And all the fields do waile their widow state,  
Sith death their fairest flowre did late deface.  
    The fairest flowre in field that euer grew,  
    Was *Astrophel*: that was, we all may rew. 30

What cruell hand of cursed foe vnknowne,  
Hath cropt the stalke which bore so faire a flowre?  
Vntimely cropt, before it well were growne,  
And cleane defaced in vntimely howre.  
    Great losse to all that ever him did see, 35  
    Great losse to all, but greatest losse to mee.



Breake now your gyrlonds, O ye shepherds lasses,  
Sith the faire flowre, which them adornd, is gon:  
The flowre, which them adornd, is gone to ashes,  
Neuer againe let lasse put gyrlond on: 40

In stead of gyrlond, weare sad Cypres nowe,  
And bitter Elder, broken from the bowe.

Ne euer sing the loue-layes which he made,  
Who euer made such layes of loue as hee?  
Ne euer read the riddles, which he sayd 45  
Vnto your selues, to make you mery glee.

Your mery glee is now laid all abed,  
Your mery maker now alasse is dead.

Death, the deuourer of all worlds delight,  
Hath robbed you and reft from me my ioy: 50  
Both you and me, and all the world he quight  
Hath robd of ioyance, and left sad annoy.

Ioy of the world, and shepherds pride was hee,  
Shepherds hope neuer like againe to see.

Oh death that hast vs of such riches reft, 55  
Tell vs at least, what hast thou with it done?  
What is become of him whose flowre here left  
Is but the shadow of his likenesse gone.

Scarse like the shadow of that which he was,  
Nought like, but that he like a shade did pas. 60

But that immortall spirit, which was deckt  
With all the dowries of celestially grace:  
By soueraine choyce from th'heavenly quires select,  
And lineally deriu'd from Angels race,

O what is now of it become aread, 65  
Ay me, can so diuine a thing be dead?

Ah no: it is not dead, ne can it die,  
But liues for aie, in blisfull Paradise:  
Where like a new-borne babe it soft doth lie,  
In beds of lillies wrapt in tender wise. 70

And compast all about with roses sweet,  
And daintie violets from head to feet.

There thousand birds all of celestially brood,  
To him do sweetly caroll day and night:  
And with straunge notes, of him well vnderstood, 75  
Lull him asleepe in Angel-like delight:

Whilest in sweet dreame to him presented bee  
Immortall beauties, which no eye may see.

But he them sees and takes exceeding pleasure  
Of their diuine aspects, appearing plaine, 80

And kindling loue in him aboue all measure,  
Sweet loue still ioyous, never feeling paine.  
For what so goodly forme he there doth see,  
He may enjoy from icialous rancor free.

There liueth he in euerlasting blis, 85  
Sweet spirit neuer fearing more to die:  
Ne dreading harme from any foes of his,  
Ne fearing saluage beasts more crueltie.  
Whilest we here wretches waile his priuate lack,  
And with vain vowes do often call him back. 90

But liue thou there still happie, happie spirit,  
And giue vs leaue thee here thus to lament:  
Not thee that doest thy heauens ioy inherit,  
But our owne selues that here in dole are drent.  
Thus do we weep and waile, and wear our eies, 95  
Mourning in others, our owne miseries.

## Even Now That Care (1599)



*A Dedicatory Poem in the Tixall Manuscript of the 'Sidney Psalms'*

Even now that care which on thy crown attends  
And with the happy greatness daily grows  
Tells me, thrice sacred Queen, my muse offends,  
And of respect to thee the line outgoes.  
One instant will, or willing can, she lose,  
I say not reading, but receiving rhymes,  
On whom in chief dependeth to dispose  
What Europe acts in these most active times?

Yet dare I so, as humbleness may dare,  
Cherish some hope they shall acceptance find,  
Not weighing less thy state, lighter thy care,  
But knowing more thy grace, abler thy mind.  
What heav'nly pow'rs thee highest throne assigned,  
Assigned thee goodness suiting that degree:  
And by thy strength thy burden so defined,  
To others toil, is exercise to thee.

Cares though still great, cannot be greatest still,  
Business must ebb, though leisure never flow:  
Then these, the posts of Duty and Goodwill,  
Shall press to offer what their senders owe,  
Which once in two, now in one subject go,  
The poorer left, the richer reft away,  
Who better might (oh, "might": ah, word of woe!)  
Have giv'n for me what I for him defray.

How can I name whom sighing sighs extend,  
And not unstop my tears' eternal spring?  
But he did warp, I weaved this web to end;  
The stuff not ours, our work no curious thing,  
Wherein yet well we thought the Psalmist King,  
Now English denizen'd, though Hebrew born,  
Would to thy music undispleas'd sing,  
Oft having worse, without repining worn;

And I the cloth in both our names present,  
A livery robe to be bestowed by thee:  
Small parcel of that undischarg'd rent,  
From which nor pains nor payments can us free.  
And yet enough to cause our neighbors see  
We will our best, though scant'd in our will:  
And those nigh fields where sown thy favors be  
Unwealthy do, not else unworthy, till.

For in our work what bring we but thine own?  
What English is, by many names is thine.  
There humble laurels in thy shadows grown  
To garland others, would themselves repine.  
Thy breast the cabinet, thy seat the shrine,  
Where muses hang their vowed memories:  
Where wit, where art, where all that is divine  
Conceived best and best defended lies,

Which if men did not (as they do) confess  
And wronging worlds would otherwise consent,  
Yet here who minds so meet a patroness  
For author's state or writing's argument?  
A king should only to a queen be sent:  
God's loved choice unto his chosen love,  
Devotion to devotion's president,  
What all applaud, to her whom none reprove.

And who sees aught, but sees how justly square  
His haughty ditties to thy glorious days,  
How well beseeming thee his triumphs are,  
His hope, his zeal, his prayer, plaint, and praise,  
Needless thy person to their height to raise,  
Less need to bend them down to thy degree:  
These holy garments each good soul assays,  
Some sorting all, all sort to none but thee.

For ev'n thy rule is painted in his reign:  
Both clear in right, both nigh by wrong oppressed;  
And each at length (man crossing God in vain)  
Possessed of place, and each in peace possessed.  
Proud Philistines did interrupt his rest,  
The foes of heav'n no less have been thy foes:  
He with great conquest, thou with greater blest;  
Thou sure to win, and he secure to lose.

Thus hand in hand with him thy glories walk:  
But who can trace them where alone they go?  
Of thee two hemispheres on honor talk,  
And lands and seas thy trophies jointly show.  
The very winds did on thy party blow,  
And rocks in arms thy foe men eft defy:  
But soft, my muse, thy pitch is earthly low;  
Forbear this heav'n, where only eagles fly.

Kings on a queen enforced their states to lay;  
Mainlands for empire waiting on an isle;  
Men drawn by worth a woman to obey;  
One moving all, herself unmoved the while:  
Truth's restitution, vanity's exile,  
Wealth sprung of want, war held without annoy,

Let subject be of some inspired style,  
Till then the object of her subjects' joy.

Thy utmost can but offer to her sight  
Her handmaid's task, which most her will endears;  
And pray unto thy pains, life from that light  
Which lively lightsome court and kingdom cheers,  
What wish she may (far past her living peers  
And rival still to Judah's faithful King,  
In more than he and more triumphant years)  
Sing what God doth and do what men may sing.

1599



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