

Sophie Mayer

Silence, Singing

These are the words I was given.

Be a good daughter.
Lead a good life.
Find a good husband.
Be a good wife.

It was the first poem anyone had ever written for me: my grandmother inscribed it in my bat-mitzvah present, an Artsroll machzor, the prayer book for the High Holydays.

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In my matching Artsroll siddur, the Jewish book of common prayer, I could have found this: ‘Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has not made me a woman.’

Not that I would have been in synagogue for weekday morning prayers: as a woman, my presence couldn’t count towards minyan, the quorum for prayer, and I couldn’t wear tefillin, the phylactery that literally ties God’s word to the skin.

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Now I have escaped the binds of a ‘life’ chiming only with ‘wife,’ what I see in the inscription is, paradoxically, how I learned to escape: the powerfully profane act of handwriting, on a holy book, a prayer of your own.

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I had precedent.

Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, is one of the earliest known female poets in English, and one of the first women to translate sacred texts into the vernacular. After the death of her brother, Sir Philip Sidney, she continued his work on a metrical translation of the Book of Psalms, including Psalm 130, the famous ‘De profundis clamavi.’

Translation is a kind of mutation. Like *Mystique*, Mary Sidney slips into the skins of a series of men. Not only her brother, but also other English translators of the Psalms: Thomas Wyatt, George Gascoigne, Thomas Sternhold, William Whittingham. And behind them, King David, legendary lover/fighter, conqueror poet, to whose bloodied hand and honeyed tongue the Psalms are attributed.

With his tongue in her mouth, Mary Sidney is seeking a solution of her own: at once poem and prayer.

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The opening of her translation of 130 sets out the stakes:

From depth of greif
Where droun'd I ly,
Lord for releife
To Thee I cry:
my earnest, vehment, cryeng, prayeng,
graunt quick, attentive, heering, waighing.

Prayer or poem, it's speech from, and in, profound need: of a listener.

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As Anne Carson argues in her essay 'The Gender of Sound,' no-one likes to hear a woman's 'vehment, cryeng' – which is too often how women's writing is apprehended. Confessional, over-emotional, nonsensical, hysterical. But Mary Sidney insists that 'cryeng' is also 'prayeng,' a protestation of the individual relationship with God – or, in a secular sense, the right to speak and be heard.

If the life others have prayed for you is 'wife,' how can you demand that right?

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From the depths – *mima'amakin* in Hebrew – a new language forms. What cannot be articulated invents, in its urgency, new articulation. Perhaps you need that new language because you're at the limits of where good behaviour can take you: 'greif,' or rage, or desire, or their meeting point.

'De profundis' was the title posthumously given Oscar Wilde's famous letter from prison, one it shares with dozens of poems in the European canon.

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning, another precedent for squaring the circle of being a (good) girl and being a poet, wrote a ‘De Profundis’ after the death of her husband. In it, she says:

‘I knock and cry, – Undone, undone!’

Here we are at the edge of language: ‘undone,’ a word that undoes itself. It speaks its unspeakability. It dares to unlace the corset of good behaviour.

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Thomas Wyatt also used Psalm 130 to comment on the limits of good behaviour. It’s likely he translated it between his arrest on allegations of adultery with Anne Boleyn in 1536 and his death in 1542.

He translated it as part of the sequence known as the Penitential Psalms, supposedly written by David after he had his lover Bathsheba’s husband murdered. Murder (not to mention both sexual and military conquest) is the murky depth from which David prays.

Yet David’s account of his seduction of Bathsheba – like his defeat of Goliath the Palestinian, and subsequent conquest of Palestine – is still told, and heard, as a boast, not penitence.

Wyatt opens Psalm 130:

From depth of synne, & from depe dispayre
Fro depth of death, fro depth of hart’s sorowe
Fro this depe caue, of darkenes, depe repayre
The haue I called (O Lorde) to be my borowe

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Wyatt calls on God ‘to be [his] borowe’ – a convenient rhyme for sorrow, but one that implies a curious relationship between the speaker and his listener.

Mary Sidney seeks ‘attentive, heering, waighing.’ Using the present participle, Gertrude Stein’s favourite part of speech, she implies reciprocity. Wyatt, though, is cutting a deal.

The OED cites his line for the word’s obsolete definition as a noun: ‘borrow, of persons: A surety, hostage; bail, deliverer from prison.’ He’s looking for God to bail him out.

Borrow is first found as a noun in the Laws of Aethelred in 1000. The medieval poets Rolle and Langland use it with the spelling ‘borgh[e]’ to mean a pledge or loan. It derives from the Old German *berg-an*: to protect, shelter, to shut in. Berg-an leaves its trace in the words borough, burgher, bourgeois, and Borgen; also burrow, bury, and burial.

The walls that shelter us will also wall us in.

Not Wyatt, though. Even in prison, but he knows he’s good for a loan from the God zone. In the depths of grief, he turns glibly to the language of power, money and law. Status: quo.

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I was brought up to believe that my body was borrowed from (in ascending order) husband, father and God; rights in it passed directly from the last to the latter to the first. There were no words I could own, or in which to own myself.

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A girl stands at the edge of an armed camp, at the edge of the sea. Usually turbulent, they have both fallen still. A suspended hush. Like Bathsheba’s, her body is the pivot of a war, subject of a king’s law. It is a borrow.

One story says that before she was born, her father the king offered a god the most beautiful thing he saw that year. Another source says the god demanded a sacrifice before a king could go to war against his Eastern neighbours.

Most sources say nothing at all. About her, Iphigenia.

The Furies’ judgement on her brother’s revenge for her mother’s vengeance for her murder at her father’s hands will become, in Aeschylus’ account, the foundation of the Athenian state, the buried secret at the heart of law.

She is the borgh[e], berg-an, the invisible security on which our myth of democracy stands.

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Euripides wrote two plays about Iphigenia. They are our main source for her story, and he told it backwards: in the first play, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, she is alive and the war is over. The god that wanted her dead has saved her.

Artemis ‘translates’ her from under her father’s knife, substituting a deer. A priestess of a death cult in Tauris, Iphigenia cures and saves her vengeance-maddened brother so they can return to Athens – and the Furies, who will rule her murder insufficient cause for her mother’s revenge.

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The sacrifice happens offstage in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Euripides’ final, bleakest work. The limits of his language.

The only evidence for Artemis translation here is a messenger’s speech to Clytemnestra, or rather a fragment of it cited in an obscure grammar book, not present in any other surviving text of the play. Some critics argue Euripides didn’t finish it before he died. Couldn’t.

There are no facts on the ground; the impossible versions are entangled with the untangleable knot of Iphigenia’s sacrifice and its necessity. If she dies, then vengeance, then law. If she is saved, then vengeance, then law.

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After all the words for kill, there is a silence. In the silence, singing. ‘Vehment, cryeng’ that men do not want to hear.

In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus has the Watchman tell the Chorus that Iphigenia tried to sing when she was brought to the altar. He says that she had sung prayers at her father’s table. Who knows, says the Watchman, what curse she would have called down had they not gagged her.

From the depths, she cries out. Undone, undone.

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The cry and the knife: we know which cuts the silence.

A history in which Iphigenia is allowed to sing – in which her song changes her ending – is not the history we live in. And yet (listen) it is.

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There is no unwriting Iphigenia’s death. But there is writing it: borrowing it, not to shore up the security of the status quo, but to graffiti the walls. Not to uphold the law, but to break it.