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The mirror of one’s (spiritual) self. Elizabeth I translates Marguerite De Navarre

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In a painting by Matthias Grünewald, the Archangel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary: a gust of wind moves the robe and cloak he’s wearing and, at the same time, stirs the pages of a book, the book that Mary was reading; some words are made clearly readable by the painter: *Ecce Virgo*… Mary was reading the prophecy which announces the miraculous birth of Christ; she was reading and pondering on it; we are allowed to think so by recalling the words of Luke in his Gospel: while the three kings were adoring Jesus, “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (2, 19). Grünewald is not the only one who depicted the Virgin Mary in the act of reading. We can remember the paintings by Antonello da Messina, Piermatteo d’Amelia, Tiziano and Giorgione. All these painters show us a woman reading and pondering. Keeping this image in our minds we can shift our attention to a woman who actually read and pondered on religious matters, Princess Elizabeth, who, at the age of eleven, in 1544, translated a poem by Marguerite de Navarre as a New Year’s gift for her stepmother, Catherine Parr; the poem was *Le miroir de l’ame pecheresse*, probably written during the 1520s and published in 1531, a poem referred to as “a poetic manifesto of reformist doctrine that caused an explosion of disapproval among French religious authorities” and which Elizabeth presented as *The Mirror or Glass of the sinful soul*.
The gift was obviously a hand-written text but it was published some years later (1548), revised by the reformist John Bale (a defender of the woman martyr Ann Askew) who entitled it A Godly Meditation of the Christian soul. Interestingly, a woodcut printed in it shows Elizabeth kneeling before Christ with the Bible in her hand.
The gift was obviously a hand-written text but it was published some years later (1548), revised by the reformist John Bale (a defender of the woman martyr Ann Askew) who entitled it *A Godly Meditation of the Christian soul*. Interestingly, a woodcut printed in it shows Elizabeth kneeling before Christ with the *Bible* in her hand.
Much research has been done to find out how this poem reached Elizabeth’s hands:

– it may have been in Anne Boleyn's library, Anne having been a lady-in-waiting at the French court in the 1510s;
– it may have been in Catherine Parr's library, considering the attention the queen paid to the religious writing of her day;
– it may have been given to her by her tutor in French, Jean Bellamain, a Huguenot.
Whatever the truth is, what matters here is that Elizabeth read and translated this poem into English prose, thus getting in touch with one of the highest expressions of the female spirituality of the 16th century, and transforming the act of translation into a spiritual experience.
Marguerite de Navarre called her poem *Miroir*. The genre of the miroir has a long tradition, going back to medieval *Specula* – typically, exemplary lives (such as that of St Francis) to be imitated to gain a deeper knowledge of one's limits and to improve oneself; however, Marguerite de Navarre went beyond this, constructing a model of self-analysis which shows how far she had moved from the perfect model, Christ.
Elizabeth does not mention the French author, either in the dedicatory letter to Catherine Parr or in the text, where she erases the name Marguerite in l. 1430, replacing it with 'me' – thus personalizing the poem into a prose mirror of herself.
We may ask ourselves: who is the woman who translates, writes and invites us to read? It is a woman who directly addresses God and Christ; who has widely read the Scriptures; who is conversant with them and can append precise textual references on the margins of the page; it is a woman who reflects on the message given by the *Old Testament* and by the *New Testament*; it is, finally, a woman who shows her naked soul to God, to Christ – and to the reader. This personal meditation becomes little by little a mirror in which every woman (or every Christian soul) can see herself reflected, being invited to follow the route Marguerite de Navarre is walking along.
In her translation, Elizabeth is generally true to the original text; she sometimes omits or adds some words, she condenses some sentences and expressions, she tones down some references to the perfect fusion between man and God, without altering the general sense of Marguerite de Navarre's meditative and confessional poem.
Not having the time and space to pursue a detailed analysis of the variants of Elizabeth's translation, I will focus on some points of it.

In the prefatory letter to Catherine Parr, Elizabeth writes:

> knowing also that pusillanimity and idleness are most repugnant unto a reasonable creature and that… even as an instrument of iron… waxeth soon rusty unless it be continually occupied, even so shall the wit of a man, or woman wax dull and unapt… unless it be always occupied upon some manner of study.

Please note the phrase "the wit of a man, or woman", with which Elizabeth links male and female minds and puts them on the same level.
In her rendering of lines 195-7, she changes the original text: talking about the relationship between the soul and Jesus, Marguerite de Navarre writes:

Le regardant (comme soy) nommé homme,
Se dit sa soeur || et frère elle le nomme

That is, the soul, seeing that Christ is called man, calls itself Christ's sister and calls Christ its brother.
The line by Marguerite de Navarre shows a clear *caesura* (se dit sa soeur // et frère elle le nomme), but Elizabeth deletes it and renders the line so as to change its meaning, writing:

we [i.e., not the soul alone, but the whole community of believers] seeing him to be called man, do call him sister and brother.

In Elizabeth's translation, Jesus is at the same time a brother and a sister, thus suggesting a sort of androgynous godhead.
In one case, she changes *pere* for *mere*:

l. 350: "Pere, fille, o quel lignaige!" becomes "Mother and daughter: Oh happy kindred!"

In another case, she erases the line that contains the word *pere*: she translates lines 581-2 ("Si pere a eu de son enfant merci / Si mere a eu de son enfant souci") as "If any mother hath taken any care for her son", thus stressing the female quality of God and shifting from a patriarchal view of the religious world to a matriarchal one.
This is relevant for the theme which lies throughout Marguerite de Navarre's poem: the kinship which unites God and Jesus to man, a kinship presented by using the language of paradox, in that Jesus and the Christian soul are, mutually and at the same time, father and mother, husband and wife, son and daughter, brother and sister. Discussing the spiritual sonnets by the French nun Anne de Marquets, Gary Ferguson has proposed a definition that is useful here: *la fémisisation de la dévotion* in the 16th century; which particularly apparent in women writers.
This feminisation implies a wide usage of the semantic field of pregnancy and child-birth, which are pervasive themes in Marguerite de Navarre's verse, in that the true Christian soul CONCEIVES and GIVES BIRTH to Jesus.
In sonnet 32, Anne de Marquets writes:

heureuse est celle-là qui a vierge enfanté le hault Dieu

[oh happy the virgin woman who has given birth to high God!]

and some lines further:

si continence en nous et foy sincere abonde
et si, par charité nostre ame estant feconde…
[temperance and faith must be dominant in us
and God's grace must make our oul fecund / fertile…]

And in Marguerite de Navarre (as translated by Elizabeth) we can read:

for I cannot perceive how *I should conceive thee* (ll. 262-63)
for after that I had *conceived and brought thee forth* (l. 419)
thou hast written in her heart (that is, in the heart of the soul) the roll of thy spirit and holy word, giving her true faith to receive it: *which thing made her to conceive thy son*… (ll. 181-84)

It's interesting to remark how Elizabeth bends and twists the English language so as to make it accept what is proper to languages of Latin origin, the distinction between feminine and masculine nouns. In the third quote, the soul is referred to as *she* since in French *l'ame* is feminine; the same happens with other words, such as *racine, foi, sensualité, amour, chose*, for which Elizabeth uses the pronouns and possessive adjectives *she* and *her*, and with masculine names such as *esprit, enfer, don, esprit and coeur* – referred to with *he, him, his*.
At lines 1349-50, Elizabeth correctly translates: "the heart doth feel well that he has received too much of it, but *he hath conceived* such desire …".
For Marguerite de Navarre and Elizabeth, pregnancy becomes thus *both* a male and a female possibility and, expressing this concept, Elizabeth herself gives birth to a new language, to an enriched and varied English, which can welcome and express *the gendered subtleties* of Marguerite de Navarre's discourse.
It is not pointless to remember here that Marguerite de Navarre was a correspondent of Vittoria Colonna, a woman who demanded a spiritual reformation of the Catholic church and whose spiritual sonnets and poems are another mirror of a restless soul seeking the right response for her disquietude; and that she was an attentive listener of Bernardino Ochino's preaching and a defender of him (and that some years later, in 1547, Elizabeth will translate one of Ochino's speeches, *Che cosa è Christo*). In a letter dated 1540, Vittoria Colonna wrote to Marguerite de Navarre:

ma essendo usanza che 'l più delle volte de i parti più faticosi sono i figliouli più amati, spero che poi VM debbia allegrarsi d'havermi sì difficilmente partorita con lo spirito, et fattami di Dio et sua nuova creatura.

I'd like to stress the sentence 'you must feel joy in having given birth to me in spirit'.
In another letter of the same year, Vittoria wrote:

ma sopra tutte queste cose è da riverire la religione, come suprema perfettione de l'anima nostra; et maggiormente in quei gran specchi, ove i popoli possono godere della utilità dell'esempio…

Religion is thus a mirror where people can see reflected examples of virtue; moreover, in the same letter, we can read:

confesso dunque che gran tempo l'ho col pensiero riverita, onde che era già sì grande il concetto di VM per fede, che conveniva partorirlo in qualche opera per amore …

Faith gives birth to works of love. Replying to Vittoria, Marguerite de Navarre signs herself "vostra cugina e sorella e amica"; and this takes us back to the theme of spiritual kinship and to the fact that, in translating Marguerite de Navarre, Elizabeth fit herself into a larger network of women reading and writing and translating – of women dealing with issues of spirituality.
Going back to the image I started my discourse with, in one of her *Comédies bibliques*, Marguerite de Navarre presents the Virgin Mary in the desert and there she is offered (by three allegorical figures, Contemplation, Memoir and Consolation) three books she is invited to read and ponder over (the books of nature, the *Old* and the *New Testament*). In the troubled years in which Geneva became one of the bulwarks of Reformation, the former nun Marie Dentière wrote a letter to Marguerite de Navarre, asking asked for her support and claiming the right of women to be allowed to read the Bible, and to preach it, just as men were. Some decades later, in 1611, Aemylia Lanyer published the poem *Salve Deus Rex Judeorum*, and she will accompany it with eleven dedicatory letters and poems, all of which addressed to women – just as, in Italy, did Laura Battiferri with her paraphrase of the seven penitential psalms of David (1564), so as to create a circle of devout women who could share the same spiritual questioning and quest.
To conclude, the image of the Virgin Mary reading and pondering over the Holy Scriptures overlaps the images of other women similarly reading and pondering; among them, Marguerite de Navarre, Vittoria Colonna, Marie Dentière, Anne de Marquets, Laura Battiferri, Aemylia Lanyer – and princess Elizabeth, future queen of England.