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"Look on thy Mary with her bitter tears":

Nicholas Breton's impersonations of Mary Sidney

This article responds to the theme of "Penshurst and Beyond" by looking towards Wilton and Nicholas Breton (1554/5–c. 1626), one of the poets who gathered there under the patronage of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke. Breton, strikingly, wrote works not only dedicated to Mary Sidney, but using her voice. In 1592 he published "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love", a verse monologue which makes the eponymous speaker express passionate remorse for her sins and love for Christ. She is distressed and self-accusing: "My sinnes my sinnes with sorrow and with shame, / Of faultes and follies coverd have my face."[1] The terms in which she expresses spiritual turmoil are often strikingly physical:

> But my hart pantes, my soule doth quake for feare,
> And sorrowes paine, possesseth every part:
> My heape of sinnes, to hevy for to beare,
> Presse downe desire, with terror of desart.[2]

Developing this combination of self-recrimination and sensuality, Breton even makes the Countess identify with Mary Magdalene as a penitent sinner: "Looke on thy Mary with her bitter teares, / That washt thy feete and wipte them with her heares."[3]

[1] Nicholas Breton, "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love", in *The Pilgrimage to Paradise, Joyned with the Countesse of Penbrookes Love* (London, 1592), p. 84.

[2] Ibid., p. 91.

[3] Ibid., p. 92.

At around the same time, Breton also wrote a companion-poem, "The Countesse of Penbrooks Passion". This is extant in two manuscripts and in a print edition of 1599, where it is retitled *The Passions of the Spirit*; there is also evidence for an earlier print edition in 1594.[4] It is a monologue in a similar vein to "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love", where once again, the female speaker accuses herself:

> My infante yeeres mispent in childish toyes,
>
> My riper age in rules of little reason,
>
> My better yeeres in all mistaken joyes.[5]

Again she identifies with Mary Magdalene – "I sitt with Marye, at the grave"[6] – and again her inner turbulence is manifested physically in tears, sighs, and sobs: "woes dissolv'de to sighes, and sighes to teares, / And everye teare to tormente of the mynde."[7] There is much visualisation of the physical suffering of Christ, and an intense desire for intimacy with him:

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[4] Michael G. Brennan, "Nicholas Breton's *The Passions of the Spirit* and the Countess of Pembroke", *Review of English Studies* 38:150 (May 1987), p. 222; Nicholas Breton, *Poems Not Hitherto Reprinted*, ed. Jean Robertson (1952; rpt Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1967), pp. xxv, lv-lvii; Hugh Gazzard, "Nicholas Breton, the Earl of Essex, and Elizabethan Penitential Poetry", *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900,* 56:1 (Winter 2016), pp. 27, 36, 40n25; Jean Robertson, "'The Passions of the Spirit' (1599) and Nicholas Breton", *Huntington Library Quarterly* 3.1 (Oct. 1939), pp. 69-75.

[5] Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (erroneous attrib.), "A Poem on our Saviour's Passion" (from BL MS Sloane 1303), ed. R. G. B. (London: J. Wilson, 1862), p. 7. Hereafter referred to as Breton, "Countesse of Penbrooks Passion" (title within MS).

[6] Ibid., p. 21.

[7] Ibid., p. 6.

"Shall I not washe his bodye with my teares, / And save the bloode that issues from his side?"[8]

In a slightly later work, *Wits Trenchmour* (1597), Breton tells us that he fell from Mary Sidney's favour. Some scholars have made the reasonable assumption that he had given offence by his appropriation of her voice and his representation of her as a tormented sinner. Margaret Hannay, for instance, wrote of "Breton's peculiar ability to put his foot in his mouth", while Mary Ellen Lamb took a similar line: "one wonders if Mary Sidney found Breton's description of her supposed torment of soul, so full of lamenting and repenting, entirely in good taste".[9] Yet Breton's strategy to regain his patron's favour was to write more works in a similar vein, continuing to associate her with the passionate penitence of Mary Magdalene. These include *Auspicante Jehova Maries Exercise* (1597), a collection of prayers in which a female speaker identifies with various women of the New Testament and applies their stories to her own spiritual state. It mostly concerns Mary Magdalene, with some attention also to the Virgin Mary and other scriptural women. The collection expresses a combination of self-recrimination for sin – "I am a polluted creature" – and desire for Christ, and is prefaced by two dedications, one to Mary Sidney, the other to ladies in general.[10] The

[8] Ibid., p. 19.

[9] Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 139; Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 52.

[10] Nicholas Breton, *Auspicante Jehova Maries Exercise* (London, 1597), f. 5r, sig. A (erroneously marked B) 2r-v, sig. A3r-v.

prayers seem to be designed for Mary Sidney to identify with, and for other female readers in turn to identify with Mary Magdalene and other biblical women through her, in a complex form of ventriloquisation. The volume is "Maries exercise", as designated in its title, in the sense of Protestant spiritual exercises (on a Loyolan model) for Mary Sidney. A few years later, in 1601, Breton published "The Blessed Weeper", again dedicated to Mary Sidney. The poem opens with a vision of Mary Magdalene weeping at the empty tomb, then passes into her voice, which is once more full of extreme self-abasement and self-blame.

Evidently, if Breton had offended Mary Sidney by speaking in her voice and associating her with Mary Magdalene, he had not learned any lessons from this or gained the idea that he should desist. Indeed, he clearly thought that what Mary Sidney wanted from him was more poems of this kind. This strategy seems to have been successful: the dedication of the volume containing "The Blessed Weeper" is to "the Nourisher of the Learned, and favourer of the Godly: my singuler good Lady, the Lady Mary, Countesse of Penbrooke".[11] It appears that Breton had succeeded in appeasing his patron and regaining her support; and, hence, that presenting her as a Mary Magdalene figure was not the source of any difficulties between them. Alexander Grosart, Michael Brennan, and others have suggested alternative reasons for Breton's fall from grace, but these may always remain uncertain.[12]

[11] Nicholas Breton, *A Divine Poeme Divided Into Two Partes: The Ravisht Soule, and The Blessed Weeper* (London, 1601), sig. A2r.

[12] Brennan, "Nicholas Breton's *The Passions of the Spirit*"; Nicholas Breton, *The Works in Verse and Prose*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 2 vols (1879; rpt New York: AMS Press, 1966), vol. I, p. xxviii.

Leaving that question aside, this article looks more closely at what we might call Breton's "Mary poems": the group of poems where he blurs Mary Sidney with Mary Magdalene, and adopts the first-person voice of this composite speaker. It builds upon illuminating earlier work by scholars including Patricia Badir, Reghina Dascăl, Hugh Gazzard, Emily Ransom, and Suzanne Trill,[13] and gives particular attention to the two earliest Mary poems, "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love" and "The Countesse of Penbrooks Passion", aiming to make three key points. The first is to highlight the fact that Breton was pioneering a new Protestant devotional poetry. Protestant fears of committing idolatry meant that the prominence of praise of the Virgin and saints in pre-Reformation poetry could not continue; yet how could a new kind of religious verse be forged, one that would avoid idolatry? Perhaps surprisingly, Breton found part of the answer in imitating the Catholic martyr and poet Robert Southwell. The second point is to demonstrate how, in crafting this new Protestant poetry, Breton also turned to the model of Mary Sidney's Psalm-paraphrases;

[13] Patricia Badir, *The Maudlin Impression: English Literary Images of Mary Magdalene, 1550-1700* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 91-119; Patricia Badir, "Medieval Poetics and Protestant Magdalenes", in *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, ed. Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 205-219; Reghina Dascăl, "Appropriating a Female Voice: Nicholas Breton and the Countess of Pembroke", *Gender Studies* (Timişoara) 13.1 (2014), pp. 48-65; Gazzard, "Nicholas Breton"; Emily Ann Ransom, "Redeeming Complaint in Tudor and Stuart Devotional Lyric", unpubl. PhD dissertation (University of Notre Dame, 2016); Suzanne Trill, "Engendering Penitence: Nicholas Breton and 'the Countesse of Penbrooke'", in *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy, Melanie Hansen and Suzanne Trill (1996; pbk Edinburgh UP, 1998), pp. 25-44.

and to her translations, where she inhabited male voices and subject-positions just as Breton's impersonations of her inhabited her female voice and subject-position. Finally, I argue that Breton was a participant in a wider literary movement of the 1590s: the emergence of a literature of the passions; and, more broadly, an experimental drive to develop new genres to represent inner states in writing.

"Passions I allow": Breton's response to Southwell

In the early 1590s Southwell wrote some exceptionally powerful poems about remorse and repentance, often using the voices of St Peter or Mary Magdalene. These poems present a speaker racked by inner passions which are expressed in physical form. The speaker of "Mary Magdalens Blushe" declares that "The signes of shame that stayne my blushinge face / Rise from the feeling of my ravinge fittes".[14] St Peter declares: "All weeping eyes resigne your teares to me".[15] Southwell also wrote a prose work, *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, which similarly depicted spiritual struggle as a corporeal experience:

> the fire of her true affection enflamed her heart, and her enflamed hart resolved into uncessant teares, so that burning and bathing between love and griefe, shee led a life ever dying, and felt a death never ending.[16]

Southwell included a preface which seems to be strategically directed towards Protestant readers: he pointed out that the depiction of Mary Magdalene was based in the Bible ("the

[14] St Robert Southwell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 29.

[15] Southwell, "Saint Peters Complaynt", in *Collected Poems*, p. 65.

[16] Robert Southwell, *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares* (London, 1591), f. 1r-v.

ground therof being in scripture"), thereby reassuring Protestants committed to the doctrine of *sola scriptura* that this work was not unsuitable for them.[17]

In a dedicatory epistle that also prefaced *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, Southwell defended the passions as having a place in faith. "Passions I allow," he declared, "and loves I approve, onely I would wishe that men would alter their object and better their intent".[18] This was not merely a reflection of the Catholic incarnational aesthetic that valued bodily and emotional experience and integrated them into worship; it also harmonised with a significant strand of Protestant doctrine. In his *Institutes,* Calvin critiqued Stoicism for its suppression of the passions:

> We have nothyng to do with that stony Philosophie, whiche our maister and Lord hath condemned not only by his worde but also by his example. For he mourned and wept both at his owne and other mens adversities. […] For if all wepyng be blamed, what shal we judge of the Lord himself, out of whose body dropped blouddy teares? If every feare be noted of infidelitie, what shall we judge of that quakyng feare, wherewith we reade that he was not sclenderly striken[?][19]

Christ, then, both experienced passions, and felt them physically, as "blouddy teares" and "quakyng feare". Many followers of Calvin reiterated this teaching; Thomas Rogers, for instance, wrote of the passions in 1576:

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[17] Southwell, "To the Reader", in *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, sig. A8v.

[18] Southwell, "To the Worshipfull and Vertuous Gentlewoman, Mistres D. A.", in *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, sig. A3v.

[19] Jean Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1561), f. 166v.

> that man, which is never moved in mind, can never be eyther good to himselfe, or profitable to others. But have them [i.e. the passions] we must, and use them we maye (and that aboundauntly) in honest wyse. And therefore the ende of our affections, make them eyther good, and so to be commended: or bad, & therefore to be dispraised.[20]

Southwell's emphasis in his Mary Magdalene writings on the passions and on the physical experience of spiritual turbulence is clearly emulated by Breton. He directly imitated *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, Southwell's prose work published in 1591, in a prose work of his own in 1595, *Marie Magdalens Love*. Particularly intriguing, however, is Breton's imitation of Southwell in "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love" and "The Countesse of Penbrooks Passion", poems published before Southwell's poetry had appeared in print. The marks of Southwell's influence on them are clear, not only in the content (which could have derived from *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*) but also in their stanza form, which is the same as that used by Southwell in most of his penitential poems: stanzas of six lines, with the rhyme-scheme *ababcc*. After Southwell's grisly execution at Tyburn in 1595, his poems appeared in print for the first time, and became a publishing sensation, going through numerous editions and influencing many Protestant poets.[21] However, Breton's earliest Mary

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[20] Thomas Rogers, *A Philosophicall Discourse, Entituled, The Anatomie of the Minde* (London, 1576), f. 3r.

[21] Nancy Pollard Brown, "Southwell, Robert [St Robert Southwell] (1561–1595), writer, Jesuit, and martyr", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/26064; Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 330-35;

poems were published before this: "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love" in 1592, and "The Countesse of Penbrooks Passion" in 1594 (as *The Passions of the Spirit*, in an edition now lost).[22] This suggests that Breton had access to manuscripts of Southwell's poems, which were in circulation in Catholic circles. Even more significantly, it demonstrates that he saw in them something potent that could be turned to use in Protestant devotional poetry.

In 1591 Abraham Fraunce, another of Mary Sidney's client-poets based at Wilton, had made his own attempt to develop a new Protestant poetics in *The Countesse of Pembrokes Emanuel*, retelling gospel narratives. This volume, dedicated to Mary Sidney, mentions Mary Magdalene only twice. The first time is when she washes Christ's feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints his head and feet with ointment – all somewhat sensual actions, but attributed by Fraunce not to passionate love of Christ and self-abnegation, but more simply and flatly to gratitude for "how herself was lately released from sev'n tormenters".[23] The second occurrence is even more low-key: after the resurrection, at the empty tomb, the Magdalene is mentioned (though not even named) as merely one of

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Gazzard, "Nicholas Breton", pp. 37-8; John Kerrigan, ed., *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and "Female Complaint": A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), pp. 30-31; Shaun Ross, "Robert Southwell: Sacrament and Self", *English Literary Renaissance* 47.1 (2017), pp. 107-09; Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 79-80; Anne Sweeney, *Robert Southwell: Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English Lyric Landscape, 1586-95* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 17-18.

[22] See n. 4 above.

[23] Abraham Fraunce, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Emanuel* (London, 1591), sig. B3r-v.

"Twoo Maries, comming of purpose, for to anoynt Christe", to whom the angel spoke.[24] Both these mentions by Fraunce are brief and restrained, and do not give Mary Magdalene a voice or explore her emotions. The contrast with Breton's "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love" of the following year is striking. It underlines the fact that Breton, evidently under the influence of Southwell, was embarking in a radical new direction for Protestant poetry by foregrounding the passions and subjectivity. In so doing he was leading the way towards later developments, yet he has received little or no recognition for this.

"From depth of grief": Breton's response to Mary Sidney

As well as taking up and developing elements of Southwell's poetry, Breton sought to please and emulate his patron, the Countess of Pembroke. There is evidence that she was working on her Psalm-paraphrases in the early 1590s, and may have completed them by 1593-4.[25] As Patricia Badir has noted, Mary Magdalene had a special role in Christian tradition as the first messenger of Christ's resurrection to the disciples, and hence to all humankind. Identifying Mary Sidney with her was therefore a way of extolling Sidney herself as a pioneering woman disseminating Christian revelation.[26]

Mary Sidney's Psalm-paraphrases were informed by the Calvinist teaching on the passions mentioned above, which assigned to them a legitimate and indeed important role in

[24] Fraunce, *Countesse of Pembrokes Emanuel*, sig. D1v.

[25] Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, *Collected Works, Vol. I: Poems, Translations, and Correspondence*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon, and Michael G. Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 340.

[26] Badir, "Medieval Poetics", pp. 214-17.

spiritual experience. In fact, Calvin specifically praised the Book of Psalms as a kind of encyclopaedia of the passions, writing:

> Not without cause am I wont to terme this book the Anatomy of all the partes of the Soule, inasmuch as a man shalnot find any affection in himselfe, wherof the Image appeereth not in this glasse. Yea rather, the holy Ghost hath heere lyvely set out before our eyes, all the greefes, sorowes, feares, doutes, hopes, cares, anguishes, and finally all the trubblesome motions wherewith mennes mindes are woont to be turmoyled.[27]

Of course, Mary Sidney's Psalms were also profoundly influenced by her brother Philip, who had begun the project. In his *Defence of Poesy* Philip not only extolled the Psalms as a "divine poem", but also praised their adaptability to different emotional states:

> And this poesy must be used by whosoever will follow St James's counsel in singing psalms when they are merry, and I know is used with the fruit of comfort by some, when, in sorrowful pangs of their death-bringing sins, they find the consolation of the never-leaving goodness.[28]

Hence the Psalms were an acceptable, endorsed basis for Protestant devotional poetry; and we can clearly trace efforts to emulate Mary Sidney's Psalm-paraphrases in Breton's poems using her voice.

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[27] Jean Calvin, *The Psalmes of David and Others. With M. John Calvins Commentaries* (London, 1571), sig. *6v.

[28] Sir Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy", in *The Oxford Authors: Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 215, 217.

Mary Sidney tends to amplify the expression of the passions in the Psalms, and to intensify the sense of passionate penitence as a physical experience with corporeal manifestations. We can see this especially in her versions of the Penitential Psalms, which include much strenuous crying to God and self-abnegation. One powerful example is Psalm 130, *De profundis*:

> From depth of grief
>
> Where drowned I lie,
>
> Lord, for relief
>
> To thee I cry:
>
> My earnest, vehement, crying, praying,
>
> Grant quick, attentive hearing, weighing.[29]

This profound sense of personal sin is also conveyed in Mary Sidney's version of another Penitential Psalm, number 51, *Miserere mei Deus*:

> wipe, O Lord, my sin from sinful me.
>
> Oh, cleanse, oh, wash, my foul inquity;
>
> Cleanse still my spots, still wash away my stainings,
>
> Till stains and spots in me leave no remainings.[30]

All these features of Mary Sidney's Psalm-paraphrases are clearly emulated in Breton's Mary poems. Indeed, the print version of "The Countesse of Penbrooks Passion" (under its alternative title *The Passions of the Spirit*) closes with two prayers in the vein of the

[29] Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, *Selected Works*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon, and Michael G. Brennan (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), p. 248.

[30] Sidney Herbert, *Selected Works*, p. 196.

Penitential Psalms, one of which opens like Psalm 130, *De profundis*: "With heavie hart I call to thee".[31]

Breton also emulated Mary Sidney in using a voice that disrupted gender-boundaries. Philip Sidney, in his *Defence of Poesy*, had praised King David as the supposed author of the Psalms for "the often and free changing of persons, his notable *prosopopoeias*".[32] In Mary's paraphrases the speaker seems sometimes male, sometimes female, and sometimes gender-neutral, and this fluidity of gender was a common feature of her work as a translator. In 1592, the year of publication of Breton's "Countesse of Penbrookes Love", she published her own translations of Robert Garnier's *Antonius* and Philippe de Mornay's *Discourse of Life and Death*. In *Antonius* she ventriloquised Garnier as male author and his characters of both genders, including both Antony and Cleopatra; while in the *Discourse of Life and Death* she inhabited the authoritative male persona of De Mornay. Breton emulated these acts of gender-blurring ventriloquism in impersonating Mary Sidney herself.

In adopting a female voice, Breton shared with other male authors of female complaint in the 1590s the ability to range across more diverse and extreme passions than were conventionally attributed to male speakers. The device also facilitated the expression of desire for God or Christ with the intensity of eroticism. In "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love", the speaker invokes the *Song of Songs*: "truely, lorde, my soule is sicke of love". She

[31] Nicholas Breton, *The Passions of the Spirit* (London, 1599), p. 73.

[32] Sidney, "Defence", p. 215.

implores Christ, "Come away love, and ever live with me".[33] Similarly in "The Countesse of Penbrooks Passion", Christ is celebrated as a lover:

> My dearest love, that dearest bought my love,
>
> My onelye life, by whom I onelye live, […]
>
> My love is fayre, yea fayrer than the sunne.[34]

Breton consistently seems most comfortable in adopting a female voice to express absolute and ecstatic love of Christ. His 1595 poem "A Solemne Passion of the Soules Love" critiques poets of secular love:

> With sunny beautyes let your loves be blest,
>
> The sunne doth fetch his light but from my love, […]
>
> Your Muses doo your Ladyes prayses sing,
>
> The Aungels sing in glory of my King.[35]

It might seem tempting to interpret this as an example of homoerotic desire, with Breton declaring his devotion to Christ, his "King", as equivalent as that of a Petrarchan poet to his lady. Yet the speaker here seems to be his soul, gendered as female, whom he urged at the opening of the poem to "fall to worke that all the world may see, / The joyfull love betwixt thy God and thee. // Tell of his goodnes".[36] More frequently it is the composite "Mary" persona (melding Mary Sidney with Mary Magdalene) which he seems to find most useful

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[33] Breton, "Countesse Of Penbrookes Love", pp. 83, 85.

[34] Breton, "Countesse of Penbrooks Passion", pp. 9-10.

[35] Nicholas Breton, "A Solemne Passion of the Soules Love", in *Marie Magdalens Love* (London: 1595), sig. F7v.

[36] Ibid., sig. F2r.

and productive for expressing passion for Christ, as continued in works like *Auspicante Jehova* and "The Blessed Weeper".

"Torment of the mynde": Breton and the 1590s "moment of the mind"

As we have seen, Breton absorbed influences from Southwell and Mary Sidney to fashion a new kind of Protestant devotional poetry in his Mary poems. In so doing he also participated in a major literary trend of the 1590s: the quest to find new ways to represent subjectivity and thought-processes in writing.[37]

In both "The Countesse of Penbrookes Love" and "The Countesse of Penbrooks Passion" we encounter a speaker initially afflicted with "torment of the mynde".[38] From despair at her own sinfulness she gradually works her way through penitence, contrition, and healing tears, and thence to love of Christ and assurance of salvation, following the process of self-conversion set out by Calvin and his followers. These included Gervase Babington, chaplain to Mary Sidney, who in 1584 dedicated to her *A Briefe Conference Betwixt Mans Frailtie and Faith*, which would go through three more editions by 1602. Here Babington described the Word of God as both "a mortifying sworde, and a comforting grace" whose power should be felt "piercing and mollifiying, shaking and comforting our soules".[39] It was necessary to pass through inner conflict and pain before achieving full knowledge of God's

[37] See Helen Hackett, *The Elizabethan Mind: Searching for the Self in an Age of Uncertainty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 285-313.

[38] Breton, "Countesse of Penbrooks Passion", p. 6.

[39] Gervase Babington, *A Briefe Conference, Betwixt Mans Frailtie and Faith* (London, 1583), ff. 3v, 2v.

grace, and this spiritual progress through turmoil to certainty should be physically felt: feeling was a way of knowing. Breton's verse-narratives of inner turbulence working towards inner peace subscribed to this doctrine.

Breton was also participating in a secular genre that similarly depicted the passions and the mind in action, namely female complaint. His stepfather, George Gascoigne, had published an early Elizabethan example of this genre, *The Complainte of Phylomene*, in 1576. Later, the years 1592-94 saw a flood of publications in this genre, including Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond*, Churchyard's expanded version of "Jane Shore", and of course Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*. Breton's Mary poems form part of this cluster of female complaints in which male poets took advantage of female personae to give outward expression to inner dramas. Indeed, the Mary poems can also be related to contemporary developments in dramatic soliloquy, and to efforts to represent inner states and processes in genres with which the Sidneys were especially associated: namely, the sonnet sequence, and prose fiction.[40]

I have written elsewhere of the years around 1600 as a cultural "moment of the mind", when thinking and writing about what we would call psychology and cognition were widespread preoccupations.[41] This produced works including Sir John Davies's philosophical poem *Nosce Teipsum* (1599), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600), Thomas Wright's treatise *The Passions of the Mind* (1601), and Florio's translation of Montaigne (1603), to mention but a

[40] Hackett, *Elizabethan Mind*, pp. 314-41, 295-313.

[41] Ibid., pp. 340-41.

few. Breton preceded all these works, and anticipated many of their preoccupations, when he used his Mary persona in 1592 to look into the depths of a troubled human mind:

> Behold the sorrowes, that my soule doeth make,
> And see what torments teare my heart a sunder,
> where every teare, doth other overtake,
> where fearefull care, puts faithfull comforts under.

Further anticipating many of those works soon to come, he also extrapolated from this inner turmoil of one individual to reflect more generally on what we might now call the human condition:

> What life is this, that wretches here we leade?
> Caring and carking for our fleshly lives,
> Never wel fil[le]d, when we are too much fedde,
> where strange conceits for true contentment strives
> Tearing our harts, and tiring out our mindes,
> For that, in fine, which but repentance findes.[42]

If we replace them in their contemporary contexts in the various ways suggested here, we can see that Breton's poems in the voice of Mary Sidney as a Magdalene-like figure are less inappropriate than might at first be supposed. We can come to understand that Breton was in fact at the forefront of innovations in religious poetry, not only paying homage to the passions and *prosopopoeias* of Mary Sidney's own Psalm-paraphrases and other writings, but also building a bridge from Southwell's Catholic aesthetic to Protestant poetry, across which many other poets would follow. In even wider terms, he was a significant and early

[42] Breton, *Countesse of Penbrookes Love*, p. 94.

participant in turn-of-the-century experiments and advances in representing thought and feeling in writing. Breton's Mary poems hence demand re-evaluation as significant contributions to important cultural developments. Mary Sidney offered him not only her patronage and membership of a literary community at Wilton, but also an adopted voice in which he could explore without inhibition

> the true repentant hart,
> which bleedes in teares with sorrowe of her sinne:
> what passions have perplexed every part,
> where penitence doth pitties suite beginne.[43]

We can now appreciate that this was not a blunder, but a simultaneous gesture of tribute and act of literary innovation.

[43] Ibid., p. 94.