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London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 2240

Lambeth Palace Library, MS 2240, is a collection of religious verse and devotional prose compiled apparently by Alatheia Bethell, whose name appears at several points in the manuscript. The first datable item is a poem that was sent to her in 1674, and the last possible date for her completion of the manuscript is 1708, the year of her death. The first third of the manuscript, fols 1r-13v, consists of poetry (extracts from versified psalms, and poems and poetic extracts on Christmas day, Good Friday, Easter day, and Christ's love for humanity). Bethell has cited the verse of six popular writers, only one of whom (John Patrick) she identifies by name.¹ Two-thirds of the manuscript's contents are prose meditations without any located source. A number of poems in the manuscript may have been written by Bethell or her acquaintances, including the first poem in the volume which is subscribed 'AB'. It appears to reflect self-consciously on the contents of the manuscript: when the speaker's heart is oppressed by the world 'This little Book . Afoards me Ease & Rest' (fol. 1r). She will give God her 'humble Praises' for his bounty, and though God expects 'A great Account' for his gifts, Bethell asks him to pardon her 'Poor Returns'.

The quatrain following this poem on the first folio similarly mentions her 'Booke', in the context of enjoying it along with her time and herself in a 'Safe Retreat'. These lines have come from John Norris's poem 'Freedom', which was printed in *A collection of miscellanies* (1687), a popular collection of his verse and essays which went to an estimated nine editions by 1723 (Green 642). 'Freedom' discusses the speaker's indifference to death if he can have true freedom, which consists in (and these are the lines Bethell has cited) enjoying his time, books, and self, retreating from cares, avoiding impertinence, and shunning greatness or high social status. The second half of the poem outlines how the great suffer, while the swain has true freedom. Bethell has made an interesting alteration to Norris's words: he implores God to let him never be great, while Bethell wishes only one thing: 'I would be great' (fol. 1r). Since Bethell does not cite the last half of the poem which outlines the hazards of greatness, the exact sense she intends by her emendation is unclear. A desire for worldly status is at odds with the tone of the rest of the manuscript: could she instead mean a kind of spiritual greatness generated through judicious retreat and contemplation? Or could the position of this quatrain on the first folio of her manuscript, underneath a poem which states her desires to praise God through her writing, instead suggest a wish for her writing project?

The identified authors from whose verse Bethell quotes were all associated with the established church in Restoration England; four of the six

¹ Most extracts were identified using one of the following electronic sources: Early English Books Online-Text Creation Partnership (EEBO-TCP), Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), or Literature Online (LION).

were Church of England clergymen, including John Norris. So was John Patrick, the author of Bethell's next source, which she has divided into two sections: 'out of Patricks Psalms Petition 1' (fols 1v-2r) and 'To promote A chearfull and thankfull submission in all conditions: 1 Davids Example:' (fols 3r-9r, rectos only). Each of these pages is full of quatrains from Patrick's popular *A century of select psalms*, first printed in 1679. Bethell ranges back and forth over many of the 100 psalms included in Patrick, choosing passages expressing her own unworthiness, need for repentance, desire for mercy, and thankfulness for grace. Patrick wrote that he chose

those Psalms or portions of them, which were most proper and of most general use to us Christians. Such are Psalms of Thanksgiving, or of Petition for mercies we all need, or that instruct us in our Duty ('A Preface to the Reader', sig. A6v).

Bethell's choice of the psalms as the first Biblical text in her manuscript is not at all surprising since the psalms were among the most familiar and flexible texts for the individual Christian, invited to voice David's words as his or her own. Bethell has, in effect, created her own new text from an existing text (Patrick's *Psalms*) which is itself a rewriting of a crucial, and often very personal, piece of Scripture.

At the bottom of fol. 12r is a stanza appended to 'A Poem for Christmass day by A.L.'. Though its occasion—the angels' singing at Christ's birth—is similar to that of the longer poem, this stanza is in fact a short hymn by another writer, George Wither. The hymn, based on Luke 2:13, was printed in Wither's *The hymnes and songs of the church* (1623) as song 34. This volume was granted a patent by James I to be bound with copies of the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter and distributed to all churches, but the Stationers' Company did not widely disseminate it (Carlson; Doelman 278). It seems doubtful that Wither's hymn was in wide circulation by the late seventeenth century, and it may be the case that Bethell cites Wither because of their family connection. Bethell's grandfather, William, was the poet's first cousin (Bigg-Wither pedigree facing 19). In fact, Bethell's manuscript was given to Lambeth Palace Library in 1967 by a Mrs. E.H. Thorne who also donated a Greek New Testament annotated by Reginald Fitzhugh Bigg-Wither, a descendant of Alatheia's sister Dorothy who succeeded to the manor of Manydown in Hampshire in 1789 (Bill 181 and 97; Bigg-Wither pedigree). This provenance information might suggest that Bethell's manuscript remained in this prominent branch of the Wither family.

Fol. 13r, headed 'on y^e Greatness of our Blessed Saviours Love to us', is another collection of poetic extracts. Bethell has cited thirty-four lines from Edmund Waller's 'Of Divine Love', first printed in 1682 in his *Poems* (Beal 580). The lines Bethell has gravitated towards all depict Christ's actions and their implications for the individual Christian. Her favourite canto among Waller's six is the third, from which she has extracted twenty lines. It is headed in the printed version, 'The same Love more amply declared in our redemption'. The final five lines of the page are not from Waller's poem, turning from meditation on the Passion to prayer as she addresses Christ directly ('Thy Love o Lord. does all my

wants Redress'). These are another version of the final five lines of the first poem in the manuscript (fol. 1r), and they stress the speaker's thankfulness, unworthiness, and desire that God might pardon her 'Poor returns'. This page is a good example of a devout reader combining texts seamlessly to make a new work, uninterested in identifying the writer of her chosen lines.

Christopher Harvey is another Anglican clergyman whose work Bethell extracted. On fols 12v and 13v (probably written after the Waller material on fol. 13r since many of the versos in the manuscript were initially left blank and filled in later) she has arranged a number of poetic materials thematically. The top half of fol. 12v is an acrostic poem on 'Alatheia Wither', the scribe's maiden name, which the title indicates was sent to Bethell on Good Friday in 1674 by a J. Harris. The following item is headed 'on Good Fryday' and it consists of two stanzas from Harvey's *The synagogue, or, The shadow of the temple*, one from his poem 'The Passion' and the other from 'The Curbe'. The first stanza addresses the intertwining of Christ's and the speaker's grief and death, while the second marvels at Christ's willingness to correct humanity's fault and to continue to forgive those who repent. On the top half of fol. 13v are twelve lines from two more Harvey poems, under the heading 'On Easter day'. The poems in question are 'The Resurrection' and 'The Ascension', both of which follow 'The Passion' in the second edition of 1647 onwards. The first extract of four lines describes the need for proper behaviour in order to be worthy of Christ, and the second of eight lines contrasts the miseries of earth with the glories of heaven, to which the believer's soul can at least aspire to ascend. Bethell seems to have been reading Harvey with an eye to lines she could use in her own devotions concerning certain key dates in the Christian calendar. Bethell no doubt came to know *The synagogue* through one of the editions of George Herbert's *The temple* to which Harvey's work was appended almost inseparably from 1647 for the next two hundred years (Howell 229-234; Bell 255-256). Modern readers might be surprised by Bethell's choice of Harvey over Herbert, but Green notes that unpolished verse tended to sell better than more sophisticated work; he classes Harvey's verse along with other poetry 'which focused on events, objects, or puzzles in an affirming manner' and found an eager audience (401).

A final identified passage (on the bottom half of fol. 13v) is from *The life of our blessed Lord & Saviour, Jesus Christ an heroic poem ... in ten books* (1693), by Samuel Wesley. Wesley was the father of the more famous John, founder of Methodism, but was himself a Church of England minister. Bethell cites eleven lines from Book 10, 'The Resurrection', suitable to her topic on that page headed 'On Easter day'. Bethell's alterations to Wesley are minor, but fit with common practice in manuscript culture to make verse applicable to the reader: the final four lines (written as five in Bethell) are spoken in Christ's voice in Wesley, but Bethell has changed them to the third person ('He lives') and the first person ('and in the Clouds we see our Lord return' instead of 'you see your Lord return'). Helen Wilcox has noted a reference to female readers of Wesley's *Life of Christ* in the newspaper *The Athenian mercury* of 24 October 1693. In response to a 'Poetical Lady' who asks for reading recommendations, the publisher John Dunton responds on behalf of the 'Learn'd Athenians' that suitable divine works

include those by Herbert, Crashaw, Milton, and '(if you have patience) Wesley's *Life of Christ*'. In a later edition of the newspaper, Dunton asserted that he was not disparaging Wesley's work but instead concerned that female readers might find the poem too long (Wilcox 193-194). Wesley was a close associate of Dunton's and a collaborator with him on *The Athenian mercury*, one of its 'Learn'd Athenians' in fact, so the controversy has an air of self-promotion about it. The other Athenians were the mathematician Richard Sault, and the poet John Norris, one of whose poems Bethell quotes earlier in her manuscript (fol. 1r; DeMaria 529). Could Bethell have been a reader of *The Athenian mercury*, influenced to read the works of two of its contributors? Or could Bethell have simply been reading the popular devotional works of the day?

The final two-thirds of the manuscript (fols 14r-52v) consist of prose devotions organized around the topics of profitable conversation (fols 14r-15v), death (fols 16r-24r), illness and afflictions (25r-36r), and how to live a pious and useful life (fols 52v-50v, reversed, and 50r-37v, reversed). Though the headings differ slightly (describing the devotional writing variously as 'rules', 'meditations', and 'directions') the short passages in each section do not differ strikingly from each other: many of them are proverbial and moralistic in nature, some of their language is Biblical, and some of them take the form of direct addresses to the writer's soul and to God, becoming short prayers. The first item, 'Some Rules for A Profitable Conversation for A.B.' (fols 14r-15v) suggests that this collection of admonitions about interacting with others in the world was prepared by someone for Bethell. At two points in this section Bethell has written the initials 'AB' suggesting perhaps her own authorship of those passages, or her own particular approval of them. The passages in question urge thankfulness for God's temporal blessings (fol. 14v) and state that nothing is worth envying but a life spent in virtue and piety (fol. 15r). This latter passage ends with 'This. and This onely. is The Greatness I Aspire Affter in This Life. /AB'. The concern of the final two sections, how to live a pious life, was a preoccupation for Protestants, as popular publications such as Jeremy Taylor's *The rule and exercises of holy living* and Richard Allestree's *The whole duty of man* attest (Green 351-355). Bethell's topics include covetousness, time, and friendship.

Bethell's technique of organizing often aphoristic directives under themes important to a conformist Protestant seems to be reflected also in her use of printed poetic material. She organizes extracts in ways that will help her consider her spiritual obligations: to petition God in David's words and to follow his example (her psalm extracts), to contemplate the significance of Christ's birth (the untraced poems on Christmas day), and to consider in depth the meaning of his Passion (the poems on Good Friday, Easter day, and additional lines on Christ's love for humanity). Two acrostic poems in the manuscript (on Alatheia Bethell, her married name, and Alatheia Wither, her maiden name, fols 9v and 12v) intertwine the addressee with the subject of the poems: Good Friday. In the first, the speaker wishes her sins to be crucified along with Christ, and in the second, she acknowledges her own guilt in Christ's death and wishes to take the Eucharist worthily. These acrostic poems in some way represent the enterprise of the manuscript as a whole: an Anglican believer is using the language and

events of Scripture, and of poets filtering Scripture, as fodder for her own devotional enterprise.

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