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To Take Posesion of the Crown: Forms, Themes, and Politics in Julia Palmer's Centuries

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"To Take Posesion of the Crown": Forms, Themes, and Politics in Julia Palmer's Centuries

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ABSTRACT

"To Take Posesion of the Crown": Forms, Themes, and Politics

in Julia Palmer's Centuries

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Department of English

Master of Arts

Julia Palmer, a little-known religious poet, composed two centuries—collections of one hundred poems intended to be sung as hymns—in the two years between 1671 and 1673. Palmer’s manuscript is unique in that its author was perhaps the only self-taught nonconformist woman to have composed centuries during the Restoration period. Although religion shaped the lives of most British citizens at the time, the public literary expression of spiritual experiences—particularly by middle-class women—was uncommon within conventional Puritanism.

The poetry's hybrid of forms, proliferation of religious themes, and undertones of political subversion offer an important glimpse into the way puritan women writers of the seventeenth century manipulated literary discourse to meet their needs. Palmer negotiates contemporary sociopolitical issues by using poetic forms and themes consistent with biblical, puritan, and social standards.

Palmer's centuries fuse the seventeenth-century spiritual journal with the eighteenth-century hymn. Applying the personal introspection of the journal to public worship would not become customary until the eighteenth century. This thesis analyzes Palmer's poetry in light of other Restoration writing as well as religious, sociopolitical, and gendered contexts in order to position it as an early form of eighteenth-century Dissenting poetry.

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Introduction

From 1671 to 1673, religious poet Julia Palmer composed two hundred poems organized in two centuries. Preserved in a single manuscript, this collection of poetry presents itself as a critical addition to the canon of early modern women's writing. The *Centuries* shed light on a number of issues that prove significant for the advancement of Restoration and literary research; they are characterized by a hybrid of forms, including poetry, meditation, prayer, and hymn; a cyclical pattern of the author's assurance and doubt of salvation and its accompanying spectrum of emotion; and a proliferation of the mystical marriage trope and its associated political symbolism. These characteristics together provide rare insight into a nonconformist woman's middle-class perspective of the Puritans' plight in post-Restoration England.

Palmer's poetry remained virtually unknown until 2001 when scholars involved with the Perdita Project[1] transcribed the manuscript, held by the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library at UCLA. At present, no critical analysis has been made of this poetry, with the exception of Elizabeth Clarke's brief introduction to the newly published collection, *The 'Centuries' of Julia Palmer.*

Nothing is known about Palmer except what can be deduced from her poetry. Clarke suggests that she was "the Julia Hungerford who married Nicholas Palmer on 12th May 1664" at All Hallows, London Wall[2] and argues a Westminster context for

[1] For information about the Perdita Project, see http://human.ntu.ac.uk/perdita/.

[2] "The baptism of their child, Samuel, on 17 June 1667, took place at St Margaret's, Westminster, a church which Joseph Biscoe (the dedicatee of Palmer's manuscript) and his family also attended. Julia Palmer's absence from later Anglican records, and the sensibilities displayed in her poetry, suggest that she became a nonconformist. . . . Julia Palmer's dedicatee, Joseph Biscoe, was both a nonconformist and an officer in the Society of Apothecaries: he became master in 1711–12. Perhaps Palmer's gift of her poems to him, some time after they were originally written, was intended to help her son's fledgling career, and to reach a wider audience of nonconformists" (Burke 170).

the manuscript (Introduction vii). Despite such nebulous historical information, Palmer reveals her soul through her poetry. Although the details of her everyday life are nowhere to be found, she uses the centuries autobiographically to chart her conversion and spiritual life as she struggles with the evasiveness of election. One may argue that an author can write with an acquired literary persona and therefore not be the same person as is depicted by the work's voice, but it is fairly safe to assume that Palmer was indeed the faithful Puritan she wrote herself to be. David Hall explains:

> Seminary historians and literary critics find themselves agreeing that language and behavior are related. Together they have gained the confidence to assert that people in the seventeenth century meant the words they spoke and wrote. One way of explaining the relationship between language and behavior is to follow Baird Tipson in assuming that "the vast majority of literate Christians . . . understood their experience . . . along the lines suggested by officially sanctioned theories of experience. In other words, they made sense of their experience in the categories they had at their disposal." Another is to realize that literary conventions . . . do not thwart the experiencing of affective piety. Stereotype and formula *may* transform piety into formalism, yet may also serve as satisfying vehicles of experience. Perceiving . . . the affective, aesthetic, and ritual dimensions of Puritanism, [one can identify] a symbiosis of literary method and the practice of piety. (222)

The purpose of Palmer's writing, as she states herself, is to help others recognize the truth of the gospel and come to love Christ. She prays continually that her words will inspire others to forsake worldliness and join in her praises to God:

> Oh that, I might, make others fall
> in love with thee, and take
> Thee, for their only all, in all
> and vanitys, forsake
>
> Oh that I could, thy praises sound
> through heaven, earth, and skys
> That each mouth might, with songs abound
> of thine excelencys [II.14.45–52]

Besides this express objective of leading others to Christ and making her praises resound "through heaven, earth, and skys," Palmer also explains how writing secures her own immortality:

> The way to get a blessed name
> And glorious, eternall fame
> Is for to glorifie
> God here, and when we dye
> he will us crown
> with true renown [I.99.91–96]

Although she refrains from saying so, she must be acutely aware of her poetry's potential to afford her "glorious, eternall fame" on earth—not just in heaven. In one poem she goes so far as to remark that it would be a small thing if she should be forgotten by all mankind "weare not [God's] glory concerned," implying that her words should in fact be immortalized for his sake as well as for the benefit of all those who will believe because of her influence:

> Oh let me be aprov'd by thee
> and then it matters not
> Though as to others, I should bee
> as one dead, and forgot

Weare not thy glory, concerned
it weare a matter small
Though I wer ein, mens eyes as dead
and soe forgot by all

Yet tis our highest, honour Lord
to glorifie thy name
Whilst we ar here, & to record
thy glory, & thy fame [II.32.13–24]

She considers the privilege of recording the glory of God the highest honor allotted to mortals. Believing that her immortality in heaven is ultimately dependent on God's grace despite whatever level of faithfulness she attains in mortality, she nevertheless secures a kind of earthly immortality by recording God's praises in words that will endure through the act of writing alone.

Although she seeks a broad and long-lasting audience for her poetry, Palmer is quick to demonstrate her modesty. Evidently Palmer's contemporaries praised her poetic talents, and in one or two of her poems she reminds herself to disregard their flattering words of admiration. She prays,

Oh let me always, through thy grace
Esteem the praise, of Adams race
As worthlese vanity
and soe contemptuously
Let me tread it
still under feet [I.99.79–84]

Apparently, some Puritans including Palmer herself considered poetic prowess to directly reflect spirituality, and in a modestly puritan fashion she flatly denies the constant joy and inspiration from God others charge her with possessing:

Yett with high joys, thou feedst me not
Thosse daintys, ar to good for me
And thosse that think, they ar my lot
They doe mistake me, utterly [II.68.25–28]

Besides the objectives of praising God, inviting others to come to Christ, and doing all in her power to merit God's grace and his ultimate gift of immortality, Palmer may also have had a number of unstated purposes for her writing, an assumption supported by the socially and politically subversive undertones of the mystical marriage trope, as will be discussed in Chapter Four.

As a journal composed in verse and intended to be sung as part of collective devotion, Palmer's *Centuries* utilize a surprising number of forms. A few centuries had previously been composed and had obviously influenced Palmer,[3] but even these centuries restricted themselves to a single literary genre. For example, in 1595 Barnabe Barnes published *A Divine Centurie of Spiritual Sonnets.* Sharing the same sentiments with Palmer, who wrote nearly one hundred years later, he "describes his poetic endeavors as a sign of his conversion" (Targoff 74). William Barton, perhaps Palmer's most direct influence, published *Two Centuries of Select Hymns Collected Out of the Psalter* in 1670. However, Palmer was likely the first poet—male or female—to incorporate the stylistic and thematic elements of the puritan spiritual journal into a century.

Barbara Lewalski addresses this issue of genre, stating that from the standpoint of a writer, genre functions as "a problem-solving model for construction, an invitation to match experience to form in a specific yet dynamic and undetermined way" (Genres 2). This matching of "experience to form" is precisely what Palmer accomplishes by inventing her own kind of century. In keeping with the nature of the salvation paradigm that encompasses both the commonplace and the divine, Palmer's centuries combine

[3] Other century writers include Thomas Watson (love poems and commentary in prose); Patrick Simon (historical prose); Henry Elsynge (political commentary in prose); Alexander Ross (divine meditations in prose); Thomas Traherne; and Benjamin Keach.

the private ponderings divulged in journal-keeping and the public praises shared in congregational worship.

Another reason for Palmer's choice of genre may be the century's ability to blanket dissident ideas which often prove difficult to discern under a combination of so many pious forms. Steven Zwicker observes that seventeenth-century poets learned to transform "old genres to accommodate the need for indirection and masquerade. . . . In this age the most characteristic and at times the most brilliant play of mind is to be found when genre is used to mask and diffuse meaning, not simply to accommodate but to enhance disguise" (274–5). Again, Chapter Four will address the possibilities of subversiveness within Palmer's poetry.

Erica Longfellow recognizes how difficult it is "to write into literary history someone who has few direct parallels among other writers" (60), and Julia Palmer would certainly qualify as one whose work does not correspond directly with that of any other author. Regardless, the intent of this thesis is to offer the first critical reading and interpretive analysis of the *Centuries.* Specifically, I will read Palmer's work in light of Lewalski's generic categories, the Protestant aesthetic, personal meditation, psalm composition and singing, seventeenth-century notions of public and private spheres, and Longfellow's analysis of women's use of the mystical marriage trope. With the help of these methods, it is the objective of this project to place Julia Palmer and her work in the various contexts of their time—poetically, religiously, and politically—in order to better recognize and appreciate her contribution to women's authorship and Restoration literature.

Organization has been proven to be the greatest challenge of this project since the literary, religious, and political were so intimately tied in the seventeenth century. For example, I have chosen to discuss sermonic forms in the chapter on personal meditation rather than in the chapter about congregational worship. Although a valid case could be made for including sermons in the latter, my focus lies in showing how meditation came to mimic sermon patterns. And even though psalm translations existed as the prominent form of lyric poetry, I discuss their public and private influence in the chapter about congregational worship in order to show the development of the nonconformist hymn. It is my hope that the reader will consider such logistics that necessitate subjective chapter divisions, keeping in mind the divisions' volatility.

Chapter One will provide an overview of the development and characteristics of the Protestant aesthetic and its emergence in lyric verse. Revelatory of an individual's struggle against sin and his or her journey towards salvation, religious lyric serves to encapsulate the emotions associated with profound self reflection within the sanctioned form of biblical poetics and the guidelines of the Puritan salvation paradigm. We will see how Palmer adopts a Protestant aesthetic as the foundation of her poetry.

Chapter Two will show how Palmer experiences the urgent and unrelenting self-analysis required of puritan meditation, spurred by her contemplation of God's word given through scriptural and experiential means. Her poetry will be discussed in light of the themes and forms she finds conducive for expressing her profound feelings of despair and ecstasy. Specifically I will discuss her reliance on God's word found in scripture, nonconformist doctrine, and personal experience as she attempts to define and express her spirituality.

Palmer writes for an audience, a detail that cannot be overlooked or underestimated, and Chapter Three will show how she clearly intended her manuscript to be shared with her own and possibly other Presbyterian congregations. We will see how many of Palmer's poems function as hymns and prayers, the common forms of collective worship. The precedent of the psalms will be discussed along with the development of the nonconformist hymn.

Chapter Four will analyze the way Palmer negotiates gender and authority within religious discourse, particularly through her utilization of the mystical marriage trope, while remaining safely inside the parameters of acceptability for puritan women writers. Her poetry exposes notions of social, political, and religious regendering, yet such a radical transgression of seventeenth-century norms appears to go unpunished, perhaps even unsuspected, because of the pervasiveness of the mystical marriage trope in nonconformist writings and the piously inspired and devotional nature of her centuries.

"Give us thy presence, with thy word": Lyric Verse and the Protestant Aesthetic

Religious lyric verse flowered in seventeenth-century Britain within the framework of English Protestantism. Following the centuries-old tradition of Roman worship, the development of a new Protestant aesthetic became possible largely for two reasons. First, reformed religion embraced the Renaissance model of representation, which placed value in artistic duplication of classical art, shifting that model's ideal from the classical to the biblical. With this shift, the Bible became the standard not only for doctrine but for poetry and consequently inspired a biblical poetics. Second, with new emphasis on a vernacular liturgy and the Bible, spiritual accountability shifted from the clergy to the lay member, and men and women were encouraged to scrutinize their standing before God and assess daily their spiritual progress against the classic Protestant paradigm of sin and salvation. This invitation inspired the religious lyric as a means of introspection as believers sought to express their faith, anxieties, assurances, and even confusion in biblical forms.

Like common prayers and hymns, lyric verse was often composed for use as part of liturgical devotion, but even as a form of sanctioned collective worship it remained a deeply personal expression and representation of faith. Barbara Lewalski emphasizes in her important study of Protestant poetics that although religious lyric was "often didactic in intention or effect, [it is fundamentally] a private mode, concerned to discover and express the various and vacillating spiritual conditions and emotions the soul experiences in meditation, prayer, and praise" (Poetics 4).

Possessing the imaginative skill required to transform meditation, prayer, and praise into structured verse, poets such as Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, and

Edward Taylor set the standard for this new Protestant aesthetic. Lewalski identifies each of these poets as a "primary exemplar of a Protestant aesthetics of the religious lyric" because of his ability to "scrutinize his soul and his art in the serious terms the Protestant aesthetics demands" (Poetics 12). A major issue for each of these men was the discrepancy between subject matter and form, or the inadequacy of human language to convey spiritual truth. George Herbert especially questioned the suitability of representing sacred truth by art and the ability of fallen mankind to express it.

Julia Palmer, influenced by Herbert and others of these poets, likewise attempts to articulate the dichotomies of her spirituality in lyric verse. Perhaps aware of her limitations as a writer, she nevertheless feels strongly about expressing her faith through poetry—a sentiment she addresses in her poem entitled "About spirituall discourse June 1672":

> What means this sinfull. Modesty
> Which maketh me, at times, soe shy
> To speak how good thou art
> when soe I might
> others envite
> To come, and take a part
>
> * * *
>
> Canst thou another. object find
> More sutable unto thy mind
> That thou dost not delight
> of him always
> To speak of him
> Unto thine utmost might
>
> Is this the reason. 'cause thine hart
> Within, is the most baren part
> If that with god weare fild
> Thou wouldst alway
> from day, to day
> To speak of him be skild [I.93.1–6, 13–24]

Confident that her poetry directly reflects her level of spirituality, Palmer composes the centuries with her "utmost might." Although she undoubtedly lacks the education of the celebrated poets of the Renaissance and Restoration, Palmer too is primarily concerned with religiosity and artistry: she firmly believes that if God fills her heart, she will "alway / from day, to day / To speak of him be skild." With this notion she sets up a difficult precedent for herself: inspiration for her words depends on her worthiness, and others will judge her spirituality by the quality of her poetry. She negotiates this susceptibility by incorporating into her verse the fundamental elements of the Protestant aesthetic: biblical poetics and the salvation paradigm.

Biblical Poetics

The relationship between truth and beauty has been debated for centuries and continues to be a pivotal issue in modern aesthetic theories. Renaissance and Restoration notions of truth centered on Augustine's directive to seek truth above eloquence, or in other words, to utilize art merely as a means of achieving the ultimate end of expressing truth. As the word of God, the Bible served as the authoritative model in defining this relationship between art and truth.

The inherently symbolic nature of language, like that of every art form, accounts for language's inability to become what it represents, and yet it is potentially powerful in its representation. Lewalski refers to J. A. Mazzeo's argument that "Augustinian poetics presupposes a symbolic universe in which the movement of thought is Platonic—'through the words to the realities themselves, from the temporal realities to the eternal realities, . . . and from discourse to vision" (Poetics 6). Seventeenth-century Protestant poets believed that devotional and meditative lyrics themselves could not produce

salvation, but such language could lead to a self-fashioning and a spiritual state of reality that would themselves merit salvific rewards.

The chasm that invariably separates spoken and written language from each other and from truth is a space of frustration for Palmer. She often struggles to find the words which satisfactorily express a spiritual experience and its complexity of emotion, and she employs a varied arrangement of stanzaic and metrical forms in an attempt to capture her experiential truths, reminiscent of Herbert's metrics in *The Temple.* Apparently Palmer isn't satisfied; as Clarke observes, the second century alone contains over twenty complex stanzaic forms (Introduction xviii), all used to explore a mere four or five themes.

Despite its inadequacies, it is this process of assigning imperfect language to divine truth—and especially the valuation of the process itself—that in part characterizes the Protestant aesthetic. In analyzing seventeenth-century religious verse, Lewalski recommends approaching Augustinian aesthetics "not in medieval but in Reformation terms, taking account of the important new factor introduced by the Reformation—an overwhelming emphasis on the written word as the embodiment of divine truth" (Poetics 6). Palmer takes the analogy a step further by relating the word to divine presence, not just to divine truth:

> Take not away thy gospell Lord
> though thou afflict us sore
> Give us thy presence, with thy word
> till time shall be no more [I.78.149–52]

Certain that reading God's words recorded in scripture is no different from hearing his voice, devout Protestants value the reading and contemplating of the Bible as if it is a direct and personal conversation with God. With this kind of emphasis on the written

word, “the Christian poet is led to relate his work not to ineffable and intuited divine revelation, but rather to its written formulation in scripture” (Poetics 6).

Language performs two crucial functions for the Protestant believer: the words of the Bible embody truth and therefore serve as sacred instruction, and the believer’s own words following biblical patterns become something almost like scripture with power that can inspire and instruct, comparable to the Bible itself. Credence is given to religious lyric because of its utilization of biblical themes and forms, and also because of a poet’s profession of divine aid. Like other poets of her day, Palmer begins each of her centuries by invoking God’s inspiration:

> Oh let thy spirit me direct
> And let me, back again reflect
> That love which from thee, still doth flow
> Whilst I do sojourn, here below
>
> Whilst here I dwell, let me soe shine
> Enlightened by, thy rays devine
> That I to others, still may be
> A light, to lead them unto thee. [II.1]

The implication that God’s voice guides the writing of the manuscript is a critical notion whereby the word of man nearly equals the word of God in authority and influence.

Because biblical poetic patterns assert scripture-like authority, they “became normative for poetic art as well as for spiritual truth” (Poetics ix). Biblical lyric meter, rhetorical figures and tropes, and historical and spiritual symbolism, particularly those exemplified by the psalms as will be discussed in Chapter Three, became standard elements in Protestant lyric poetry and in fact are so often repeated that their overabundance often triggers questions of sincerity among modern scholars.

For example, the mystical marriage trope is in some way present in nearly all of Palmer's two hundred poems, and a twenty-first century reader may question the need for such reiteration. But in his study of the Puritan literary tradition, David Hall acknowledges the fact that in the past, "social historians gave the cold shoulder to anyone who supposed that words were inseparable from behavior." He argues, however, that "times have changed, and most of us have become persuaded that language, as the essential stuff of knowing, embodies the construction of 'reality' on which people act. . . . Language . . . is a form of action even when it is the formalized and esoteric discourse of theologians" (195). This understanding of language as a form of action holds perfectly with what Palmer and other seventeenth-century writers believed about words representing truth, and the repetition of biblical meter, theme, and symbolism in Renaissance and Restoration verse attests to the impressive extent of these poets' religious conviction.

Besides repetition, Palmer's writing demonstrates other characteristics of contemporary verse. Her poetry's unpretentious rhetoric and largely monosyllabic diction holds with acceptable models for seventeenth-century women's writing. More often than not, the centuries accentuate Palmer's urgent pleadings and disquiet meditations more than a polished and complex poetic construction would, but even in their simplicity and repetition they are often beautifully insightful in their themes and analogies:

> Oh that thou wouldst march apace
> Over the ruged coasts of time
> That I with joy, may see thy face
> And bath in seas, of love devine [II.88.13–16]

In another poem, Palmer cleverly contemplates the incomprehensibility of eternity in terms of "arithmetick":

Eternity, eternity
what a vast thing, thou art
And shall I once, regardlesly
put thee out of my hart

* * *

Could we count, all the piles of grase
to this day, that have been
Since the creation, on the face
of the earth, to be seen

Could we count all, the drops of rain
Since the creation
And could we tell, each seed, or grain
that from the earth have sprung

Could we reckon, up all the sands
that ly on the sea shore
Or ev'ry dust, in all the lands
on earth, t'would be great store

* * *

When millions of ages, ar past
our stat, shall not wax old

Ther's no arithmetick so vast
wherby its number's told [I.76.1–4, 17–28, 33–36]

Some profound poetic qualities stand out despite this poem's simplicity. For example, three consecutive stanzas begin with "could we count" or "could we reckon," the repetition of which implies her natural inclination to try to calculate the vastness of eternity. But no matter how hard she attempts to add in finite terms, eternity remains impossible to conceptualize.

More than anything, her poetry is wrought with impossibilities and paradox ("When millions of ages, ar past / our stat, shall not wax old"), and her explorations of spiritual truths result in some of her most perceptive ideas about election, righteousness, justice, and mercy. The Protestant aesthetic can be best understood in terms of paradox

inherent in her religion—especially within the spiritual, psychological, and emotional parameters of the salvation paradigm.

The Salvation Paradigm

The most important biblical influence on Protestant aesthetics was the Pauline or salvation paradigm that exemplifies the spiritual drama of a religious life. Members of reformed sects were encouraged to identify the paradigm's six stages—election, calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification—in their own lives, recognizing that God's grace alone would initiate any or all progress from one step to another. A spectrum of emotion was associated with this prototype of fallen man journeying toward celestial glory: anguish when God's presence was not felt, elation when assurance was granted, and confusion when burdens were heavy or prayers remained unanswered. Lyric poetry reflects these deep contrasting feelings that

> sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestants understood to accompany the working out of [the] paradigm of the spiritual life in the elect Christian's soul. These feelings involve well-defined emotional, psychological, and spiritual states or conditions which the Christian was urged to try to discern in himself and his own experience. This emphasis upon the constant scrutiny of personal emotions and feelings is a primary cause of that introspective intensity and keen psychological awareness so characteristic of seventeenth-century religious lyrics. (Lewalski Poetics 20)

One reason for such intensity is that the assurance of grace is never long lasting, and restless anxiety takes its place in the heart of the believer. Thus the spiritual journey

is not one of linear progress but rather of cyclical movement between confidence and confusion. “The great biblical model,” Lewalski points out, “is the Psalmist with his anguished cries *de profundis*, and his soaring *te deums* of praise” (Poetics 4). Palmer’s centuries mimic this reflective and emotional pattern in her nearly day-by-day spiritual self-assessment. Often she moves beyond shallow observation to a spiritually mature evaluation of her changes in mood and levels of faithfulness:

> Thou lifts me up, & casts me down
> Between thy favour, & thy frown
>
> I am still tossed to, and fro
> Somtimes hope, somtimes my foe
>
> Doth get of me, the uper hand
> Soe that my faith, can hardly stand
>
> I never shall, be free from moane
> Till I climb up, unto thy throne [I.37.27–34]

She often yearns for death, impatient with the fact that this process of faith, temptation, sin, and repentance will continue until then (“[Death] shalt be, my welcome guest / A friend, most greatly in request” [II.77.25–26]). She also exhibits exasperated confusion about God’s willingness to provide only ephemeral assurances of his love and grace:

> Thou’lt scarsly let me look
> but clapst the door too
> And leavest not a hole, or nook
> at which I may, look through
> Thou givest me a tast
> and drawst away, in hast [II.53.1–6]

Clarke suggests that in its formal innovation, impatient tones, and conflicting themes, Palmer’s poetry reflects the direct influence of George Herbert (Introduction xix). In his preface to a collection of Herbert’s poetic works, John Tobin explains that

> Herbert's dramatic colloquies occur in an implied narrative of the struggle of the speaker's soul against the discipline provided by a gracious, but not always obviously gracious deity ("a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master"). In the course of following this winding and elliptical plot, the reader is required to examine and absorb for his own use each word, line and stanza as he traces the speaker's progress towards self-abnegation but not self-extinction. All this is happening in a universe remarkably empty of others. Indeed, to shift from narrative to dramatic terms, except for the shadowy chorus of biblical types, the Herbertian stage has only two actors: a divine protagonist and an often restless yet contrite and ultimately dutiful antagonist who discovers and, with effort, maintains a proper attitude towards the loving God with whom he has continually been struggling. (xvi)

Like Herbert, Palmer allows her audience to see into the intimate relationship she is working to establish with God through the means of poetic verse. She wrestles with her inner contradictions as well as with a seemingly contradictory God whose creations are seldom perfect. However, she recognizes her limited understanding compared to that of God, as she expresses in the second century:

> We fill our selfs with fear
> And restlese, soull perplexety
> Because we do not wisly eye
> Considering what is
> Gods dealings here, with his
> We look for god, & find him nott
> Our ignorance doth so besott
> Though he to us draw neer [II.25.1–8]

By no means is Palmer always confident of her own standing before God or eventual salvation, but her faith prevails despite the countless times she gives way to temptation, questions God's mercy, and fears for her eternal welfare.

The Protestant aesthetic in seventeenth-century poetry and all of its related forms—personal meditation, sermons, prayers, hymns, centuries—arose from a heightened consciousness of biblical poetics and an incessant emphasis on the salvation paradigm. Palmer carefully adhered to these standards of contemporary lyric verse: her centuries follow biblical generic, rhetorical, and symbolic models and manifest an obsession with self-scrutiny in relation to the conversion process.

"Tis time, my soull to exercise thy faith": Personal Meditation

In 1606 Joseph Hall stated, "Divine Meditation is nothing else but a bending of the minde upon some spirituall object, through divers formes of discourse, until our thoughts come to an issue" (6–7). The influence of meditative exercise on literary practice equaled that of the Bible, creating the impetus not only for lyric poetry but for other literary and sub-literary genres. Protestant preachers encouraged the conscious and constant assessment of one's spiritual condition, and believers' sincere meditations often took form in lyric verse, sermons, spiritual journals, and centuries.

The widespread Protestant emphasis on meditation grew from the perception of self-analysis as essential to spiritual progress and ultimate salvation. Meditation served as "a technique to renew conversion" (D. Hall 218)—a mental act in effect equal to any outward ordinance. Requiring discipline and method, and viewed as an indispensable task, meditation demanded careful analysis of every thought and every action—what Thomas Gataker refers to as spiritual "watchfulness":

> A . . . helpe to this watchfulness is to be oft sifting and examining our selves, viewing and surveying our heartes and our lives, taking account of our selves how wee watch and how wee walke, how the case standeth betweene us and God, how wee goe backward or forwards in the good wayes of God, and how we thrive or pare in the gifts and graces of his spirit. (77)

English Protestants were not the only believers called upon to conduct serious and regular meditation. Catholics had a long tradition of conducting personal spiritual analysis, and they too valued the conversion experience gained through the meditative

process. However, Barbara Lewalski identifies two characteristics unique to Protestant meditation: “a focus upon the Bible, the Word, as guiding the interpretation of the subject and providing meditative models; and a particular kind of application to the self, analogous to the ‘application’ so prominent in Protestant sermons of the period” (148). Unlike the continental Ignatian or Salesian forms of meditation in which the meditator “seeks to apply himself to the subject, so that he participates in it, . . . the Protestant procedure is very nearly the reverse: instead of application of the self to the subject, it calls for the application of the subject to the self—indeed for the subject’s location in the self” (149).

Seventeenth-century Protestants filtered every scriptural, doctrinal, political, social, and physical experience through the lens of personal subjectivism, evaluating its spiritual meaning. This chapter will demonstrate how Palmer drew inspiration for her meditations from God’s word and from personal experience and how these meditations took shape in literary form following the patterns of sermons and spiritual journals.

The Word as a Source of Meditation

In his study of the Bible, John Calvin observes an interesting pattern of promise-making and promise-remembering. He refers to the example of King David who supplicates the Lord, “O God . . . thou who hearest prayer!” (Psalm 65:1–2) “What is more lovely or agreeable,” Calvin asks, “than for God to bear this title, which assures us that nothing is more to his nature than to assent to the prayers of suppliants?” By addressing God as one who hears and answers prayers, David claims for himself and reminds God of the repeated promise made in the scriptures—that God will help him to obtain what he seeks. Calvin observes that in the Psalms,

> if the thread of prayer were broken, transition is sometimes made to God's power, sometimes to his goodness, sometimes to the faithfulness of his promises. It might seem that David, by inserting these statements inopportunely, mutilates his prayers, but believers know by use and experience that ardor burns low unless they supply new fuel. Accordingly, . . . meditation both on God's nature and on his Word is by no means superfluous. And so by David's example, let us not disdain to insert something [in our prayers] that may refresh our languishing spirits with new vigor. (vol. 2, 867)

For Calvin, Palmer, and other Protestants, meditation on the Word—scripture, doctrine, ordinances, and particularly the salvation paradigm—offered one source of heavenly assurance along with the guidelines for achieving salvation. Nothing could be more important to understand or apply than God's literal words as recorded in scripture and spoken over the pulpit. In response to the divine model of the Word recently made available to them in print, English writers analyzed their own spirituality with words, "often rehearsing, sometimes disclaiming or remaking, but usually echoing the biblical Word" (Doerksen 14).

The centrality of the Bible in Protestant belief naturally made it foundational for all forms of meditation. Its vernacular made possible, virtually for the first time, a dialogical engagement with the text by which readers could interpret and internalize the Bible in their own familiar terms. A sense of familiarity with Christ, himself the Word, became possible through meditation, and thus Protestant leaders urged their followers to make their scriptural lectures solemn occasions for contemplation.

Palmer's poetry attests to the fact that she took seriously the directive to reflect frequently on passages of scripture. Both centuries contain numerous poems with scriptural phrases embedded within them, and some expostulate on a single verse or phrase. For example, Palmer gives poem 72 in the second century a title taken directly from Matthew: "lett your light so shine, before men that they may see, your good works and glorifie your father which is in heaven. June 24 73." She then proceeds to expand on what the verse implies, praying to God for the power to realize its principles in her life:

I know when I
to heaven fly
I shall be like thee then
Oh let, me heare
thine image bear
Among, the sons of men

* * *

Find out some way
whereby I may
Be of some use, whilst here
Till thou shalt call
mee hence, and shall
Fix me in heavens sphere

Be rays devine
let me soe shine
That I may glorifie
Thy love, and grace
throughout my race
And to eternity. [II.71.1–6, 19–30]

In this dilatio of scripture, Palmer dissects each element, careful to address its relevancy to her own life. With her plea to God to be "rays devine," she humbly acknowledges the source of her light and the reason behind her ability to "shine." She implies that in heaven she will herself be a source of light or goodness, but that on earth she can at best be an image or reflection of that supreme light. Her meditation thus suggests the Calvinist

conviction that works performed by man are inherently evil, and God alone is fallen man's sole source of goodness, grace, and light.

The events of Christ's life as recorded in the Bible also provided meditative subject matter. In keeping with Protestant subjectivism, the meditator, not Christ, is central in the holy birth, crucifixion, and resurrection. In other words, the events and emotions that Christ experienced acquire their greatest significance when the believer applies them to himself or herself. William Haller explains that

> the symbolism of the nativity and the passion came to mean little to the Puritan. . . . The Puritan saga did not cherish the memory of Christ in the manger or on the cross, that is, of the lamb of God sacrificed in vicarious atonement for the sins of man. The mystic birth was the birth of the new man in men. The mystic passion was the crucifixion of the new man by the old, and the true propitiation was the sacrifice of the old to the new. (151)

Indeed, Palmer's focus lies in her own internalization of divine suffering and virtue—not those of Christ. By imagining that she shares his feelings and experiences, Palmer forges an intimate connection between herself and Christ that legitimizes and augments her own spirituality. In each of her poems that reference or even chronologize Christ's mortal experiences, Palmer concludes with a personal application, as exemplified in her contemplation of Luke 2:7 ("[They] laid him in a manger because there was no room for him in the inne"):

> How strange this word, sounds in my ears
> (ther was no room for him)
> Who was above created peers
> but in a sorry Inne

Nay worse then this, was yet his doom
Ther's no room in the Inne
But in the stable was his room
though Zions crowned king

* * *

He who commands both sea, and land
The world, with all its traine
Hee whom we cannot comprehend
Was in a manger lain

* * *

Well world, I'le never wonder more
att all thy usage bad
My deer Lord, whom angels adore
no better usage had.

Come take a lodging in my hart
And ther erect thy throne
Do not distaine, to fill each part
Deer Lord, tis all thyne own [II.11.1–8, 13–16, 21–28]

The tone of the poem is one of first-person commentary rather than one of historic detachment: she finds it "strange" that there would be no room in the inn for the coming Lord, and "worse" that He would be born in a stable. The poem's final stanzas further emphasize Palmer's meditative subjectivity in two less-subtle ways. First, Palmer relates her own "bad usage" from the world to that which Christ received. By equating herself with Christ in this way, she shifts attention away from Christ's suffering toward her own. Second, she metaphorically places herself in the innkeeper's position and allows Christ full access to her heart. Her invitation to "come take a lodging in my hart" is not restricted to time or place—she speaks both from Bethlehem on the night of the holy birth and from Westminster London in June 1672. As she imagines herself saving the infant Jesus from the "doom" of having nowhere to rest, time and place become irrelevant since both she and Christ are present. This ambiguous restructuring of history,

with Palmer in a central position playing a crucial role, proves indicative of Puritan subjectivism.

Just as the Bible proved to be an important source of meditation, nonconformist doctrines espoused by seventeenth-century Protestants provided abundant themes on which believers were encouraged to ponder. Sometimes conflicting in nature, these doctrines naturally stimulated reflection and often produced confusion in the minds and hearts of believers. For example, "seventeenth-century Puritan texts resound with assertions that those who are elected to salvation must respond actively to the promise of salvation when it is made to them through the means of grace. Do such injunctions contradict the doctrine of unconditional election?" (D. Hall 201) Relationships between election and works, grace and faith, passivity and activity conjure questions that demand serious contemplation. Samuel Willard, a Puritan preacher in New England and contemporary with Palmer, acknowledged the fact that this mixture of activity and passivity "may seem a paradox." But in the process of pondering, he determined "it is an evangelical truth, that a Christian must acknowledge that he can do nothing, and yet resolve, and bind himself to do all" (quoted in Lowrie 188).

This notion of salvation depending on an absolute reliance on the mercy of God coupled with an individual's "bind[ing] himself to do all"—through the formal making of covenants, compacts, oaths, and vows—underlies the Protestant sense of salvific assurance and dominates Palmer's *Centuries.* The numerous references to covenant-making show how Palmer viewed this act as mutual, binding, and enduring: Christ promised to atone for her sins, and she in turn commits to live a righteous life:

> A covenant with me, thou hast made
> Its lasting, firm, and sure

It is a strong, foundation laid
Which ever, shall endure
Sin cannot break, the knot that's knit
By compact, long agoe
Into thy hands, I will commit,
Both soull, & body, too [I.14.17–24]

Her vow of righteousness echoes the language employed by the dying Savior on the cross—"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46)—placing her in the same position as Christ and validating, even deifying her covenant. As completely as Christ fulfilled his part of the covenant, so she promises to fulfill hers.

Based on her conviction that "sin cannot break, the knot that's knit / By compact," she asserts in another poem that "happy . . . are thosse, who be / Secure, by cov'nant right to thee" (II.75.39–40). It is surprising then that so few of her poems reflect the happiness that supposedly results from a confidence in covenant-making. Indeed, doctrinal contradictions leave more room for doubt than for assurance, and Palmer is often spiritually mature enough to identify the weak points of her own faith. In several instances, she makes an assertion of faith and then immediately calls it into question with a parenthetical aside: "Dear Lord, what is this world to me / (I think) I love it not" (I.20.45–46). Perhaps this is one of her greatest strengths as a Christian and as a writer—she remains unafraid to explore her deepest concerns and ask her most troubling questions. She often admits her confusion about doctrine, for example, repeatedly examining the concept of free grace throughout the two centuries:

The freenese of thy grace is strange
When we consider itt
And in thesse thoughts, let our souls range
what wonders, we do meet

Of fallen man, thou dost refuse
the most, and pase them by

yet out of them, some thou dost chouse,
noe reason given why
Thou chousest out, sometimes the worst
to be heirs, of thy grace
Whilst better natures, ar acurst
for ever, from thy face [I.58.1–12]

The questioning voice in which she addresses God in this poem celebrates the paradox of his election of the worst sinners for salvation, glorying in humanity's inability to understand his divine ways. Despite its reverence, her tone also hints at her frustration with the doctrine's opacity and especially with a god who would accurse "the most [of fallen man], . . . noe reason given why." That God would violate both justice and mercy by electing the unrighteous for salvation and denying it to his servants seems illogical to Palmer, but in conclusion she overrides her skepticism with a resolute humility: "Let me, by this, learn to adore / Thy holy, sov'raignty" (lns. 49–50). The faith expressed in this last stanza, in contrast to the critical perplexity of the rest of the poem, suggests her internal tug-of-war between doubt and belief. Many of her poems contain this drastic shift in tone as her wavering faith grows strong before again diminishing, and her diction often reveals a conscious attempt to replace her distrust with confidence:

When as the sun, forsakes the earth
The flowers fade, & dye
So on my soull, there is a dearth
When thou remanst on high

Yet something Lord thou leavst behind
As pledg of thy return
An aking hart, & troubled mind
Whilst after thee, I mourn

Thou hidst thy face from me, *yet on*
On [*sic*] *thee, I will rely* [I.17.19–26, emphasis added]

A variety of emotional states accompanies Palmer's cyclical thought patterns as she contemplates the salvation paradigm, or the progression of one's spiritual life from fallen man to divine rebirth to eternal exaltation. Sometimes an experience gives her a glimpse of "angellicall delights" (II.13.8) and generates a rapture so glorious she finds her feelings inexpressible. Most often, however, she suffers from what she refers to as "spirittuall poverty" (II.4.44) or a lack of God's "influences of grace" (I.44.39). As she moves from one extreme of the emotional spectrum to the other, Palmer acknowledges both her heartfelt joy and her deep despair as bestowed upon her by God:

> For what thou givst, I'le thankfull be
> And what thou dost, deny to mee
> sense of the want of itt
> shall make me, att thy feet
>
> To ly low, in humility
> Plunging, in self abhorrancy
> as unworthy, to be
> once, looked att by thee [II.74.1–8]

> My soull is as t'were on the rack
> tormented ev'ry Joynt
> Thy gracious presence, I doe lack
> but this I cannot find
>
> To run from thee, (through grace alone)
> I neither can, nor will,
> Thy faithfulnese I'le roll upon
> And rest, although thou kill [I.49.41–48]

As she plunges into "self abhorrancy," Palmer clearly lacks for joy. By no means does she feel a constant assurance of election, and as this is her greatest desire and the basis for her happiness, the two centuries evoke the anguish of her soul. Even more emotive is the imagery of her tormented soul stretched beyond its limits "on the rack" without the presence of God to comfort her. The diction of the last line is particularly shocking:

although God “kills” her, she cannot and will not run from him. Suggestive of Christ’s last moments on the cross as he suffers without the divine aid of his Father, this poem places Palmer in an analogous position: despite her spiritual torment she finds it impossible to forsake her faith in God. The fact that he “kills” her fallen nature also alludes to Origin’s assertion that God kills the man of flesh in order to make room for the man of the spirit, and Palmer thus emphasizes that her torment, even death, result from her divine election. Since the oscillation from anxiety to fear was conventional, hope always supersedes her fear. One may question how existential her doubt and self-abhorrence truly are if they are dispelled as soon as she shifts her thoughts to Christ, but regardless of how formulaic her sincerity may or may not be, her poetry becomes an important means of contemplating her spiritual state and voicing the poignant emotions she believes to be associated with such meditation.

Of particular abundance throughout Palmer’s centuries is what Lewalski refers to as heavenly meditation, an exercise “whereby the Christian was urged to call forth, by a meditative process emphasizing the senses and the imagination, some foretaste of heavenly joys” (165). As Palmer considers mortality to be largely worthless without the constant presence of God, she asks, “What have I else, to live upon / In my defer’d salvation / but futerietys” (I.71.7–9). In this state of “defer’d salvation” she longingly meditates on the “glory of that day, when all the saints, that ever were are, or shall be shall meet together” (II.43). She imagines that

> In the Herusalem above
> There shall be no more night
> Their light. flows, from the god of love
> They need no candle light.

The city is transparant gold
On pearl, is eve'ry gate
The spirit hath to us foretold,
the glory of the state [I.21.105–112]

Palmer proves expert in looking ahead to the glorious state of salvation, the day of her union with Christ, and the promise of eternal rest—but she displays an unquiet restlessness in the meantime. In the vast majority of her poems, Palmer expresses a sincere longing to die—a rather morbid motif from a modern viewpoint. However, in light of the fact that her greatest desire is to be united with Christ, her death wish seems more justified. (The implications of this notion of unity with Christ in death, known as the mystical marriage trope, will be discussed in Chapter Four.) Palmer complains, "I cant here hit the mark, oh let me fly / We'ith hast to'a sinlese immortalyty" (II.71.35–36). She considers anything below perfection to be sin, and in several poems she even implies that if she were righteous enough, God would let her die and bring her into his presence:

Those whom thou lovest best
Thou calst for soon away
To take their everlasting rest
Where joys, doe ne're decay [I.10.29–32]

Such melancholic repetitiveness attests to her sincere desire to receive God's election and sharply contrast with the brilliance of her heavenly meditations. Such extremes reflect a thoroughly Puritan conviction of the salvation paradigm.

Reading Palmer's meditations on scripture, doctrine, ordinances, and the salvation paradigm, one senses the uncertainty with which she views her own righteousness on one hand and the extent of her trust in God on the other. Her poetry also evokes a sense of urgency: she eagerly parallels her experiences with those of Christ; she quickly covenants to righteousness despite spiritual anguish; and she anxiously welcomes death. Impatient

with her imperfections, she centers herself in the perfect and unqualified word of God, looking to it for assurances of his love and the promise of his mercy.

Experience as a Source of Meditation

In keeping with Protestant subjectivism, Julia Palmer evaluates each event, object, thought, and action for its spiritual significance and practical application. Just as necessary as personal encounters with the Word are everyday experiences that indicate signs of election. Lewalski points out that Protestants view experience "as the proving ground of the Word, a second scripture which reveals God's will and provides a basis for determining [one's] spiritual state" (160). E. Brooks Holifield further explains that because "Puritans attributed the work of creation to the Father, of redemption to the Son, and application to the Spirit, . . . the process of application . . . elicited their constant scrutiny" (141). Palmer scrutinizes her personal experiences for reassurance of God's love, and she believes her spiritual sensitivity to such evidence results from her faith. Addressing her own soul, she asks,

> Shall not thy sweet experience
> Bring joy, & comfort, unto thee
> Whilst worldlings, sottish ignorance
> Thou shalt with greif, & wonder see [I.82.21–24]

She prays, "Let no day passe, wherin I may / not see new tokens of / Thy grace, & love" (II.86.19–21). For Palmer, daily meditation on experience enhances her spiritual vision, brings her joy and comfort, and helps her avoid the trappings of the "sottish ignorance" of the world. Many of the titles of Palmer's poems expose her soul's dependence on experience as a means of communication with God: "The soull expostulating with god, upon perticular occations, & sad aprehandtions"; "The soull gathering some releif from experience, though clouded, & far from what it would have"; "God demand, & the souls

reply." Palmer interprets each experience, whether joyous or devastating, as a message sent from God. Just as he makes known his will by his Word, God speaks to his people through experience.

For this reason, Protestant preachers continually admonished their followers to meditate on experiences, feelings, and impressions. Not only were believers to observe God in the details of their lives but they were also to record these evidences as a way of solidifying their validity and preserving them for the future benefit of self and posterity. In 1670 John Bartlet urged Christians to "meditate on the Experience you have had of God's faithfulness, and goodness you have had in all his Providences. . . . To help you herein, you shall do well to make a Catalogue, and keep a Diary of God's special providences; to take a Book, and write down the most remarkablest Providences of God, over you and yours" (Bartlet 69–70). Palmer seizes upon even the least remarkable of providences as indication of God's hand in her life, and she expounds on these in her writing, almost as if she were holding a tangible gift from God that she turns and examines from every angle. The simplest occurrence encapsulates God's love and cultivates belief. Erica Longfellow observes that

> "religion" in this period was constitutive and archetypal, a fundamental agent in the construction of literary identities and the shaping of literary texts. Although it could be used to enter into other debates, religious discourse was not simply a code for concerns more secular, and to our twenty-first-century minds, more "real." For early modern men and women, God and belief in God were "real," vital elements of daily life. . . . The questions of belief were inescapable. For most men and women, such

questions were both everyday and ultimate, almost invisible in the routine but technicoloured in the drama of national crisis or personal tragedy. (12)

Palmer's daily life spins around the ultimate question of salvation, and its drama escalates with every perceived change in her spiritual wellbeing. She looks to personal experiences and observation—political developments, social encounters, and physical surroundings—to answer the inescapable "questions of belief," and in searching for God, she finds him in everything.

National crisis and political turmoil, according to Palmer's belief, result from the wickedness of the people and serves as warnings from on high. In several of her poems, Palmer identifies contemporary political events as God's public acts in both nation and church. In a sermon-like poem entitled, "The fruit of sin, or a lamentation for england," she adopts the critical tone and historical overview common in the writing produced by the Nonconformist movement (Clarke Introduction viii):

> What cause have we, asham'd to stand
> when we doe seriously
> View, what sin has, brought on our land
> within our memory

She goes on to list a series of current events brought about by the sins of the people, including the plague, the internal discord that allowed for enemy advantage, and the fire of London. Palmer then concludes in a prophetic tone that echoes Isaiah:

> Yet have we, not return'd to thee
> but still we are the same
> Prodigiously wicked, are wee
> dishonoring of thy name
>
> The glory of england is thin
> her beauty, waxen leane
> And yet we act, as if by sin
> 'to undoe our selfs, wee meane [I.78.1–4, 25–32]

Calamities rage and the glory of England fades as those who dishonor God's name and continue in sin provoke his wrath. It is perfectly clear to Palmer that the nation's tarnished abundance, beauty, and glory would be restored to their original brilliance if unrighteousness ceased. Note her use of first-person plural ("prodigiously wicked, are wee"). Instead of softening the poem's injunction to repentance by including herself among the sinners in need of repenting, she more forcefully declares the nation worthy of the scathing judgments of God as she calls down judgment on herself along with her country, refusing to exclude herself from the consequences of sin.

When Palmer does not employ her poetic voice to lecture the world, converse with God, or reprimand her own soul, she uses it to converse with others, reliving conversations—perhaps as a way of saying what she wishes she would have expressed in the moment. Meditating and writing allow her to state opinions freely and present logical explanations for her arguments—actions that might be impossible, unacceptable, or simply rude in conversation. In one of her longest poems, Palmer debates with "mr H," who believes longevity to be a great blessing. She delivers a series of candid reasons why death is preferable to long life, and at times her retorts even smack of self-righteousness:

> As for those, that have a sight
> And tast, of Christ, there harts delight
>
> All your perswasions ar in vain
> To make them wilingly, remain [II.56.65–68]

She implies that any love for life invalidates a love for Christ. Whether she actually responded to Mr. H in this manner will forever remain uncertain, but she was unafraid to declare her strong feelings on paper.

Responding to an even more innocent encounter with a neighbor, Palmer reveals the extent to which she spiritually gauges the most familiar of occurrences. The following poem is her surprising reaction to the common social convention of greeting someone with the question, “How doe you doe?”:

Who can be well
Whilst here they dwell
In an imperfect, sinfull, stat
Stilling, bowing down under the weight
Of Sin, which dwells within
And ther doth sprout, & spring

It cannot be
heare, well with me
Whilst I am absent from my king
My joy, my comfort, & my spring

and fountain of delight
to whom I’de take my flight

I cannot say, / I’me well one day
Because I am imprisoned
And in times net entangled

So that I cannot fly
into eternity

Saten doth vex / and still perplex
Whilst I live here, he will not rest
but by temptation
How then should I be well
whilst in the world I dwell

But it may be
you’l say to me
That I do wrest, by violence
The question this is not your sence
you meane my health, & ease
I’le answer you, and cease

Tis true that healths, good in it self
But’th more I find of health & ease
the more I find my pain encrease

and inward, restlese strife
for fear, of a long life

Tis you then must
resolve me first
Which way, I may, speak truth when you
Do say to me, how doe you doe
Till then be silent, and
put me not to a stand

Ask me noe more
till hence I soare
Out of this world, of misery
into a blest, eternity
then you may know I'me well
though I cant come to tell [II.12]

Weighted down by sin, absent from the presence of God, imprisoned by mortality, and vexed by Satan, Palmer presents several reasons for the worthlessness of mortality and seems upset that they are not apparent to everyone. She finds it absurd that any Christian would wish for good health that could possibly lead to long life. Puzzling and almost comical at first, the forcefulness of her argument attests to her earnest desire to be taken to live in the presence of God. The voice of this poem expresses some of Palmer's truest emotions and captures her inclination to read the world with spiritual eyes.

With such a loathing for her own mortality, it is surprising that Palmer gleans so much inspiration and joy from her physical senses and the world around her. If, as Longfellow argues, seventeenth-century Protestants viewed religion as constitutive and archetypal, Palmer is no exception. Her writing is "thoroughly 'Puritan' in [its use of] 'physical, earthly, often sensual imagery to enfigure the invisible things of God'" (D. Hall 214, quoting Robert Daly). Palmer draws inspiration for her poetry from natural surroundings and everyday objects in contemplating their representation of divinity. The

sensory world becomes a set of allegories by which she can read God, and she invites the reader similarly to see, taste, hear, and walk with him:

> Oh come and see, oh come, and see,
> The beauty of the Lord
> And you will find itt for to bee
> Far, beyond all report
>
> * * *
>
> Oh come, & tast, oh come, and tast
> How good and sweet he is
> And thou wilt find, a blessed feast
> Neer kin, to heavens blise
>
> Oh come, and hear, oh come, & hear
> And then your soull shall live
> To this deer Jesus, draw thou neer
> He will, thy sins forgive
>
> Oh come and smell, oh come and smell
> The sweet perfumes of love
> And thou wilt wish to wade through hell
> To bee with god above
>
> Oh come and walk, oh come and walk
> In this delightfull feild
> Thou wilt find it no Idle talk
> The pleasure that t'will yeeld [I.32.1–4, 9–24]

She *sees* God's beauty, *tastes* the feast of his gospel, *hears* his merciful words of forgiveness, and *walks* in his fields that are sown, nurtured, and ultimately harvested, symbolic of the salvation process. Perhaps Palmer had heard Robert Boyle's assertion that sincere believers can turn all "Creatures in the world, as well mute and inanimate, as irrational, not onely into Teachers of Ethicks, but oftentimes into Doctors of Divinity," thereby making "the whole World . . . a Pulpit" (19, 79). John Calvin further argues that observing God's works is a more effective means of discerning his attributes than speculating on metaphysical uncertainties. The "skillful ordering of the universe is for us

a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible. . . . The most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order, is . . . to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself" (52–3, 62). While contemplating the symbolic lessons taught by nature, Palmer pens some of her most thoughtful observations and heartfelt desires:

> I would be like, the violet
> which casts a fragrent smell
> yet downwards. Always bends the head
> and lowlyly, doth dwell
>
> Or like unto some friutfull tree
> on which mine eye, I lend
> And then, its fruitfull boughs I see
> by weight of fruit, to bend [II.32.37–44]

In Protestant fashion, her first inclination is to ponder the symbolism of the objects, conditions, relationships, and ideas that immediately concern her: nature, apparel, food, fire, music, market days, dress patterns, pregnancy, sickness, currency, trade, etc. In another poem, she applies the connotation of stamped coinage to her heart, signifying that God has engraved his image there, thus marking her as his:

> That which belongs, to princes great
> Doth bear some mark of honour
> My hart oh Lord, itt is thy seat
> Oh stamp thy image there
>
> now let it by thy spirits dints
> Be charecteris'd for thine
> And let it not, bear satens prints
> Henceforth, att any time [I.18.21–28]

Regardless of her earnest desire to "be charecteris'd" as God's own, and however long and however deeply Palmer meditates on passages of scripture or symbols in nature, she remains uncertain of her standing before God. She asks herself,

Wher is thy faith, wherby
with confidence
beyond thy sence
Thou shouldst on god rely
His interest he will cecure
His word, to thee, doth this ensure [II.97.7–12]

Even though God's word offers assurance, as does the "sence" she has from experience, she has to convince herself incessantly that God will keep his promises. The practice of recording these uncertainties and assurances—writing them down, making them visible and tangible on paper—is one way she endeavors to solidify the slipperiness of divine election.

Literary Forms of Meditation

Toward the middle of the seventeenth century, a subtle transition occurred in the tradition of meditative practice. Protestant preachers not only encouraged self-examination but also began to suggest structured literary methods by which to go about it based on sermon-like patterns and the journalistic tradition. Thomas Hooker defined meditation as the "serious intention of the mind whereby we may come to search out the truth and settle it effectually on the heart" (quoted in Webster 49), and the written form of meditation therefore "establishes a record of the truths earned in this process and [provides] an account of their establishment (or otherwise) in the [writer's] heart" (49). More than merely accounting for conversion, these written forms allowed their authors an authoritative, even a political voice.

Protestant worship depended heavily on the sermon not only in its verbal form as a Sunday discourse but especially as a systematic literary model for personal meditation and life in general. In other words, "lay men and women practiced a spirituality that reiterated the language of sermons" (D. Hall 225). As the pattern for deliberate

meditation, the sermon consists of two basic parts: expository (what Richard Baxter terms *cogitation)* to instruct, and application (what he calls *soliloquy)* to stimulate emotion and change. "Given this identity of elements and purposes, the terms *sermon* and *meditation* became well-nigh interchangeable in Protestant theory" (Lewalski 152). Palmer's extensive use of cogitation and soliloquy in the configuration of the *Centuries* attests to her dependence on the sermonic form as an approach to thinking and writing.

Cogitation, or what might be thought of as the defense of doctrine, generally consists of pondering the nature of a specific doctrinal point, drawing evidence from multiple sources. Charles Cohen observes that "in their sermons, Puritans wove a tapestry whose various threads of meaning from common speech, law, Scripture, and Reformed theology overlay one another in complex and sometimes discordant patterns" (quoted in D. Hall 220). The same can be said of the fashion in which Palmer constructs her poetry. Many of her poems address a single concept: sin, faith, temptation, judgment, discontentment, prayer, death, pride, hope, love, or the Sabbath day, and in what could be considered a discourse on faith, for example, she renders the single concept complex by endowing it with human traits in order to appropriate its meaning:

> Faith is a busie, active, grace
> It bears a great command
> In all, & ev'ry single case.
> It will still have a hand
>
> Faith rides in triumph over sin
> Saten, the world, & death
> Whilst these doe rage, twill sit, & sing
> As if t'were now grown deaf
>
> This durty world, faith laughs, to scorn
> Trampling itt under foot

It is to high, & nobly born
To rake in dung, & durt

Faith is a strong, couragious, grace
It will not be out'-dar'd
But can look dangers, in the face
And not be greatly scar'd

Faith is a grace, that's quik of sight
And ready to lay hold
It can spy out, a glance of light
And grown theirby more bold

Faith can work by great contrarys
It picks life, out of death
Joy, out of great extremitys
Sap, out of barren heath

* * *

Faith follows god, close in the dark
And lyes down att his feet
If god doth speak, then faith will hark
On what he saith, t'will feed

Faith digs into the golden mine
Of the rich promises
And then crys out, all this is thine
Holding fast, what it has [I.30.29–52, 65–72]

The poem's isolated topic and instructive elements point to the cogitative component of meditation. Palmer personifies faith as "a busie, active, grace," that "rides in triumph over sin," laughs the "durty world" to scorn, "look[s] dangers, in the face," "work[s] by great contrarys," and "follows god, close in the dark." By attributing human characteristics to faith, Palmer collapses the conventional idea of faith as a quality to be possessed and instead portrays it as a power that acts of itself. This rather insightful incarnation of spiritual abstraction, along with several other poems like it, expose the extent to which Palmer ponders on principles of doctrine.

Soliloquy, the application of knowledge gained through cogitation, most often presents itself in Palmer's poetry as exhortations—to the sinner, to the faithful, to the "mad world" of unbelievers (I.82.1), and to her own soul. The following poem argues the necessity of faith and reads as if it could be spoken from the pulpit because of its urgent tone and passionate diction:

> Tis time, my soull to exercise. thy faith
> The day cals for it, in its strength, and height
> The enemys, grow proud, and insolent
> Ther rage, & malice, fain would have, a vent
> But hast thou not, a god to glory in
> Though from below, no comfort to thee spring
> He is thy father, which att stern doth sit
> Who wisly governs all, as he sees fitt
> His preditermin'd counsels they stand sure
> No anxtious thought, can for thee this procure
> To lessen to thee, one affliction
> Upon thee, twill a greater load lay on
> But on thy god, as on a rack most high
> Thou mayst look down, with great security
> Upon the raging billows, here below
> When roaring, as if they would overflow
> Unto thesse bousterous waves, he sets a bound
> The wrath of man, shall to his praise redound [I.80.1–18]

Palmer calls upon her soul to exercise its faith just as a preacher would exhort his congregation. Palmer employs the rhetoric of sermons and through her writing becomes a preacher herself. Richard Baxter asserts that

> every good Christian, is a good Preacher to his own soul. Soliloquy is a Preaching to ones self. Therefore the very same Method which a Minister should use in his Preaching to others, should a Christian use in speaking to himself. . . . Dost thou know the right parts and order of a Sermon? and which is the most effectual way of application? why then I need to lay it open no further: thou understandest the Method and partes of this

> soliloquy. Mark the most affecting, heart-melting Minister; observe his course both for matter and manner; set him as a patern before thee for thy imitation; and the same way that he takes with the hearts of his people, do thou also take with thy own heart. (pt. 4, 749–51)

As Palmer's voice acquires this priestly authority, the written form of the sermon takes on political significance. She writes what she is not permitted, as a woman, to speak from the pulpit. What is more, she proves herself capable of composing "the right parts and order of a Sermon" and therefore feels justified in temporarily positioning herself as a mouthpiece for God. Unlike Quaker women who preached on street corners, Puritan women were expected to practice their less vocally. However, their participation in sermonic writing made possible a voice of authority and the quiet toppling of dictated social roles.

Similarly, the Puritan spiritual journal developed as a sincere product of meditation—one that women utilized to articulate freely both religious and political agendas. In 1657 John Eliot exhorted Richard Baxter, "Bestow on[e] quarter of an hour in a day to write what passed . . . even between the Lord and your spirit" (quoted in Webster 39). Spiritual journals facilitated a system of personal discipline by which Puritans monitored their status within the salvific framework. Webster explains that "unlike other facets of the godly discipline, fasting and prayer, meetings for sermon repetition, solitary meditation and self-examination, [journal-keeping] produces a material site for the self . . . , a means by which the godly self was maintained, indeed constructed, through the action of writing" (40). The major premise for the Puritan spiritual journal is scriptural in that it imitates God's written Word:

> God had provided, to Reformed eyes, clear evidence that He had elected some to grace. However, scripture neglected to name those so chosen and saints had to examine themselves to make good this deficit. Perhaps this reveals a further imperative behind the diary form: as the major [premise] is textual [in scripture], so the minor premise becomes textualized [with the recording of experience],[1] thus acquiring a certain validation both for the present, as the act of writing gave form to meditation, and for the future, where the text became a minor and personal scripture, to the clearly major and general Scripture. (50)

Just as the Bible records the works God performed in behalf of the chosen Israelite nation, spiritual journals document his works witnessed on a personal level. The tracing of God's hand in her life serves a concretizing function, allowing Palmer to identify, assess, and remember the signs of her election.

Defined by Clarke as "documents of religious devotion . . . tied to specific dates" (Microhistory 216), spiritual journals differ from contemporary diaries and autobiographies in several critical ways, all of which have political implications. First, the journal centers conspicuously on spiritual rather than secular material. Rather than being a record of daily events, each entry is a description of divine details, a "micro-narrative of grace" (Webster 53). At the beginning of her poem, "Some few perticular mercy (amongst many) taken notice of throug the whole course of life," Palmer comments on the enjoyment derived from contemplating God's works—not her own:

[1] "The Lord has spoken peace to some mens hearts thus, He that is lost shall be found: he that believes in me shall never thirst; and seeing this they conclude (the Lords spirit helping them, for sometimes they cannot do it) peace. For the major [premise] is the word, the minor [premise] experience, and the conclusion the Lords Spirits work quickening your spirits to it" (Thomas Shepard, *Parable of the ten virgins* in *Works*, II, 216).

How sweet it is, to meditate
upon thy love, and grace

And quietly to ruminate
whilst we, thy works do trace

She then proceeds to summarize the highlights of her spiritual life, from birth to childhood to her "marriage" with Christ. In this spiritual biography, she is careful to accentuate not what she herself has done but what God has done for her despite her wanderings from him:

Somtimes on duty, I would set
then throw it by again
yet still, thou wouldst not me forget
but laidst a cecreet traine

* * *

To fecth [sic] again my wandring soull
back to thy blessed self
Though many times, my hart was stole
by earths vain, foolish pelf
Thou notwithstanding leavst me not
But didst my soull persue
Till my hart, thou hadst fully got
thou wouldst not bid adeiw [I.70.1–4, 17–28]

Unlike their aristocratic and Anglican counterparts, middle-class Nonconformist journal writers so intently maintain a spiritual focus that they often omit names, locations, and other specific details. For example, in one poem called "An experience Concerning afliction october 26 71," Palmer contemplates her many trials without divulging the nature of them:

This day I met, with triels sharp
Which made my soull to bleed
(but god did come, and chear my hart)
Of it their was great need

* * *

It was a triell sweet to me
Which did thy love reveill
By it, thou dist in some degree
Thy favour to me seall [I.27.1–4, 21–24]

The focus lies in the meaning of the trial, not the trial itself, thus maintaining a devotional tone and creating a wholly spiritual identity for the author.

However, such concealment of detail does more than accentuate the author's spirituality. It also holds the power to disguise subversive social and political ideas[2]—a notion backed by a second characteristic of spiritual journals. All of the surviving journals written by women are unfailingly connected with eminent men—a sign of their authors' active civic involvement despite the journal's meditative, private, and "passive model for authorship" (Clarke Microhistory 222). Clarke notes that these journals "are almost exclusively a product of wealthy women of the merchant classes, on the margins of the gentry, who have close ties to the Nonconformist ministry"[3] (216). Lacking the aristocratic status that sometimes allowed women to override the supposed inappropriateness of women publishing, middle-class women writers ensured their manuscripts' circulation and preservation by dedicating their writings to prominent men in the community. Palmer dedicated her manuscript to Joseph Biscoe, a well-known Westminster apothecary active in Nonconformist circles. This, coupled with a notable lack of instruction for the manuscript to be burned at her death like many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century diaries, shows her conscious attempt to ensure the dispersion and longevity of the *Centuries* despite her unremarkable position as a middle-class woman.

[2] These will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.
[3] Clarke cites authors like Mary Love, daughter of wealthy City merchant Matthew Stone; Mary Roberts, member of an extremely influential Nonconformist family; Ollive Cooper, daughter of a Presbyterian minister; and Mary Penington, wife of prominent Quaker Isaac Penington. (See Microhistory 216.)

In their pious sermonic and journalistic forms, personal meditations possessed the potential to be judged worthy of public consumption—sometimes even to be adopted as Nonconformist liturgy. In the next chapter, we will see how public worship came to incorporate private modes of mediation and how it was possible for Palmer to endow her poetry quite literally with a voice. Palmer herself acknowledges the close connection between private pondering and public praising when she exclaims,

> How greatly this doth fill
> The hart, with love, when seriously
> We on thesse wonders, look and pry
> This makes us long, for to begin
> Our hymns. of love, and praise, to sing
> on Zions cacred hill. [II.61.25–30]

"Soe I may others envite to love thee": Congregational Worship

Within the nonconformist religious climate of Restoration England, personal meditation played a crucial role as a means of private devotion. Just as necessary for the welfare of the soul, however, was a regular participation in collective worship. Indeed, public worship and private devotion fueled each other, and the interplay between spoken and written texts, spontaneous and premeditated devotion, and public and private expression deepened and reinforced a worshiper's spirituality. Little or no distinction was made between devotions sung as hymns or recited as prayers because both forms of worship shared the same purpose of unifying members with each other and with God.

As an active member of a congregation, Julia Palmer surely would have experienced the synergy that results from joining in worship with fellow believers. Her manuscript reveals abundant evidence of her belief that, in a very real way, voices united in prayer and song represent a congregation's collective commitment as well as an individual's external promise of faithfulness.

An intense post-Reformation debate among clergy and lay worshipers, however, was whether public worship is merely an external show lacking the sincerity of feeling required for true discipleship. In the 1570s, attacks from within the Anglican Church against the Prayer Book criticized prescribed reading as mechanical, artificial, and ultimately ruinous to the spontaneous composition of one's own prayers (Targoff 5). Thomas Cartwright, a leading voice of the nonconformist position, voiced his mistrust of collective prayer; he felt that "in the realm of public devotion, reading [prayers] cultivates at best passivity, at worst hypocrisy" (39). Even Shakespeare reveals prayer's potential to become a performance rather than a heartfelt expression in a well-known scene from

Hamlet: King Claudius assumes a virtue he lacks when he kneels to pray, but despite his efforts he finally admits, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3.97–98).

Many English conformists and nonconformists, on the other hand, recognized the necessity of public worship for the strengthening and preservation of the individual worshiper. Ramie Targoff explains that for John Donne, “the public space of the church is the site for achieving selfhood, for maintaining personal wholeness, for realizing the individual ‘I’ not in spite of, but precisely because of, a collective act of prayer” (53). Similarly, Richard Hooker forcefully argues that the establishment’s formalized language of devotional worship safeguards against the “natural weakness of human devotion” in consistently generating prayers worthy of divine attention (5). He further observes:

> When we publicly make our prayers, it cannot be but that we do it with much more comfort than in private, for that the things we ask publicly are approved as needful and good in the judgment of all, we hear then sought for and desired with common consent. Again, thus much help and furtherance is more yielded, in that so be our zeal and devotion to Godward be slack, the alacrity and fervor of others serveth as a present spur. (Targoff 52)

Not only does the act of public prayer reinforce worshipers’ faith, Hooker argues, but it is scripturally based. He cites the Old Testament account of Jonah and the city of Nineveh in which Jonah calls the Ninevites to repentance. Collectively, the people pray to God for forgiveness, and much to Jonah’s surprise, God hears their prayers and spares the city from destruction, saying to Jonah, “Shall I not spare Nineveh, the great city, in which

dwell more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons?" (Jonah 4:11). Pointing to this story as "evidence of God's preference for collective over individual prayer," Hooker's early patron John Jewel quotes Chrysostom in arguing that

> if the prayer of a single person is so powerful, much more so is the prayer which is offered along with many other people. The sinewy strength of such a prayer and the confidence that God will hear it is far greater than you can have for the prayer you offer privately at home. . . . [God] does not mention the large number [of Ninevites] without purpose. He does so in order that you may learn that any prayer which is offered with a unison of many voices has great power. (quoted in Targoff 52)

More than offering a shared devotional experience, and even more than serving as a collective petition to God, congregational worship functioned first and foremost as a "carefully patterned practice of devotion" for the individual, "the structured movement from anxiety to assurance" (D. Hall 221). Men and women approached personal meditation by following the patterns set forth in collective devotional practices—specifically, as discussed in Chapter One, the patterns of the Puritan salvation paradigm. The forms of public devotion—common prayers and congregational hymns—revolved around a poetic tradition, one that repeatedly tested the relationship between poetry and worship. Over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the forms of congregational worship moved from the prescribed conventions of psalm translation to the more creative and introspective composition of nonconformist hymns.

This chapter will trace the development of collective worship, situate Palmer's poetry within that development, and account for the manner in which she composes her "praises" to God.

The Psalmic Tradition

As the ultimate model on which worship both public and private was based, the Psalms had held an important place in all Christian liturgies since well before the Reformation. It was not until the sixteenth century, however, that psalm translations in the vernacular made possible the deeply personal connection that individual worshipers came to feel toward them. In 1581, Anthony Gilby identified the unique value of the psalms in his assessment that "wheras al other scriptures do teach us what God saith unto us, these praiers . . . teach us, what we shal saie unto God" (quoted in Zim 80). Targoff makes the important observation that "the explosion of Psalm translations in the years following the Edwardian Reformation reflected less the poetic impulses of individual authors than the devotional impulses of a liturgical culture interested in generating new texts for corporate worship" (58). As the proliferation of biblical "copying" for the purpose of unifying worshipers increased, the perception of poetry as an art form with a devotional utility steadily expanded. The quality of devotion in the minds of believers came more and more to depend on the quality of the poetics. "Within an ecclesiastical culture that had not clearly defined a place for poetry, the exception of the metrical Psalms as simultaneously poetic, liturgical, and scriptural texts provoked a new self-consciousness about the relationship between poetry and devotion" (58).

Initially however, emphasis on the liturgical and scriptural aspects of the psalms overshadowed the possibility of poetic inventiveness. As one of the first complete

English version of the psalms, the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter is characterized by the literal conservatism of its translation, meter, and rhyme scheme. The psalter therefore achieved its objective of preserving the original psalms' meaning and style. Rivkah Zim argues that when they were "adopted as adjuncts to the English liturgy between 1559 and 1696," these early versions, though lacking the impressive poetics of later psalm translations, set a uniquely Protestant precedent of involving lay members in worship singing (207). Zim explains that

> although metrical regularity can reflect the constraint imposed upon a poet by the need either to fit his words to pre-existing tunes, or to make his verses suitable for musical improvisation, nevertheless such metrical regularity would also have assisted a moderately literate singer to read and remember these holy songs, and to sing them to brief melodies repeated stanza by stanza. (117)

The translation of the psalms into the "English metre" for the benefit of the individual worshiper reflects the increasingly widening break of Protestantism with Catholicism. Even among Protestant sects, however, psalm translation differed drastically. Music in the Church of England had developed a reputation of conceptual and rhetorical difficulty, coupled with the fact that choirs rather than individuals performed most of the singing. In *Gospel musick. Or, the singing of Davids psalms, &c. in the publick congregations, or private families asserted, and vindicated* (1644) Nathaniel Holmes denounces all forms of "cathedral singing" as

> abominable, in which is sung almost everything, unlawful litanies,

> and creeds, and other prose not framed in metre fit for singing. Besides they do not let all the congregation, neither sing, nor understand what is sung; *battologizing* and quavering over the same words vainly. Yea nor do they all sing together, but first one sings an anthem, then half the choir, then the other, tossing the word of God like a tennis-ball. Then all yelling together with confused noise. This we utterly dislike as most unlawful. (quoted in Temperley 79)

Repetitively described as "unlawful," Anglican music failed in the eyes of Nonconformists because of its disinterest in personalizing meaning for church members. Puritan music increasingly reacted against such spiritual remoteness. Holmes offers both "scriptural and *a priori* justifications" for the "necessariness of singing [psalms] with other ordinances: Before sermon the churches sing, to quicken their hearts to prayer. After communion they sing, to raise them up in praise. . . . The psalm after a sermon sometimes hath done that which the sermon alone could not do" (79). In other words, Holmes, like other Nonconformists in his day, perceived the psalms as evocative texts that possessed just as much transformative power as ordinances or sermons—perhaps more. Palmer clearly believes that like psalm translations, her own poetry possesses the power to transform and inspire; she frequently asks God to make her poems "a light, to lead [others] unto thee" (II.5.8), acknowledging the influence these words can have on an individual's salvation.

However, the notion of poetry and salvation being so closely tied was a concept that Thomas Wyatt, the Earl of Surrey, Sir Philip Sidney, Mary Sidney Herbert, and several other psalm translators—both conformists and nonconformists—began to explore

over a century earlier. They realized that profound spiritual change inspired by the psalms in large part arose from their poetic qualities and the range of emotion such qualities make possible. They began to experiment with inventive and sometimes even radical imitations. Modern scholars claim that such personalized translations reflect "an attempt to create a vehicle for conveying strong private feelings in a public form" (Zim 45). Unlike the prescriptive psalms of Sternhold, these versions relied more on the psalm as an inspiration for broadened expression than as a mold for confining that expression. In *An Apology for Poetry,*

> Sidney does not aim only to legitimize devotional poetry as a source for spiritual comfort, but instead means to establish its rightful inclusion within the language of the church: "they that with quiet judgements will look a little deeper into it, shall find the end and the working of it such as, being rightly applied, deserveth not to be scourged out of the Church of God." . . . Once Sidney assigns the label of poetry to this body of devotional texts, he forces a new attention to the relationship between poetry and liturgy, a relationship that was formerly unproblematic precisely because no one had demanded that David's Psalms—however elaborately versified—be recognized as anything other than texts of praise and prayer. (Targoff 76)

As texts of poetry, praise, and prayer, psalm translations initiated an increasingly self-conscious poetics that placed devotional emphasis just as much on the individual as on God; the process of psalm translation—the rewriting of scripture—required a creativity that previously had belonged only to God.

Thomas Wyatt was among the first to draw on a "devotional tradition of penitential exercises, and on an Italian literary model, [securing] the divine poetry of the Psalms firmly [within] the English poetic repertoire." In doing so, he pioneered "the poetry of meditative introspection, and his initiative established the coexistence of psalms and sonnets as English literary kinds" (Zim 206). But, Targoff notes, "despite their *theological* affinities with the Reformed faith, Wyatt's highly introspective and complex translations remain decidedly outside of the *devotional* models for prayer . . . introduced during the reign of Edward VI, who came to the throne five years after Wyatt's death in 1542" (78).Wyatt thus focused on the psalm as a mode of personal meditation rather than as a means of collective worship. The fact that Wyatt translated the seven penitential Psalms as his last work, Hallett Smith claims, suggests the private motive of preparing "the soul of the translator for death." Others like the Earl of Surrey composed translations in the Tower in an effort "to spend the time piously and profitably while in prison" (260). Like Wyatt, Surrey managed "to convey the literal sense of the biblical models by combining the detail of scholarly interpretation with studied personal relevance. [Surrey's] psalms are impressive and moving both as poetry and as responsible biblical paraphrase" (Zim 206)—but not necessarily as material designed to be used for collective worship. Clearly, some psalmists intended their translations to serve solely as private readings.

At the close of the sixteenth century, the Sidney-Pembroke Psalms accomplished something that previous translations had not by "applying poetic techniques to a simultaneously personal and liturgical model of devotion" (Targoff 78). The Sidney-Pembroke psalter "confirmed what Wyatt and Surrey had demonstrated on a smaller

scale fifty years earlier, that there was poetry in paraphrase . . . [but] Sidney's psalms practically exhausted the formal possibilities for new developments in the metrical psalm as a literary kind" (Zim 207) while consciously simulating "a book of liturgical prayers" (Targoff 81). In its sonnet form, the Sidney-Pembroke psalter

> maintains its traditional Petrarchan role as a vehicle for praise, but this praise is now spoken on behalf of the community of worshippers, not the poet. . . . Wyatt's taste for enjambment and parenthetical musings create a rhetorically as well as psychically complex petition that seems inherently unsuitable for congregational reiteration. Philip [and Mary] Sidney, by contrast, [create] a highly accessible and melodic lyric [that could easily be adopted by congregations]. . . . The countess of Pembroke's brief (and excised) expression of disdain for Sternhold-Hopkins places her squarely among a growing number of English Protestants in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries who seek to reform the [conformist] church's Psalms by poetic means. (77, 79, 82)

Using poetics to bridge the inherent differences between collective worship and personal meditation, Philip and Mary Sidney redefined the "psalms" as vehicles for self expression that maintained the elements conducive for collective devotion. In a similar way, George Herbert exemplified the fusion of worship and meditation as he "employed the devotional models of the Prayer Book—its habits of collective petitioning, praising, confessing—to shape his personal poetics" (98):

> Herbert's use of common meter . . . embodies the hopes of established churchmen that the rhetorical models of the Prayer Book or Psalter would

> become one with the language of personal devotion. What is remarkably generous about Herbert's lyrics, and what in an important sense reflects the poetic fulfillment of common prayer, is their capacity to apply the skill and introspection that we traditionally associate with private meditation or erotic sonnets to poems that seem designed to be shared by others. Cranmer . . . claimed not to possess the 'grace and facility' to compose common prayers in verse; nearly one hundred years later, Herbert seems poised to do just that. (102–103)

In large part, Philip and Mary Sidney and George Herbert set the precedent for religious poets to follow. For the next two hundred years, many poets sought to compose personal meditation in ways that facilitated collective devotion. The means utilized to motivate one to introspection and meditation became the same means of articulating such meditation—a subtle but important development in the process that had predominated for centuries and one, as we shall see, that allowed Julia Palmer to impose her meditations on her fellow believers.

The Nonconformist Hymn

The rigidity of opinion towards the psalms as the only acceptable musical form of worship began to loosen by 1661. One of the leading figures of the Presbyterian movement, Richard Baxter, reasoned,

> Doubtless Paul meaneth not only David's Psalms, when he bids men sing with grace in their hearts, Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: Yea, it is past doubt, that Hymns more suitable to Gospel-times, may and ought

> to be now used: And if used, they must be premeditated; how else shall Congregations sing them? (quoted in Benson 85)

This solicitation for "Hymns more suitable for Gospel-times," or hymns with greater personalized meaning and application, reflects a significant broadening of attitude towards the types of music appropriate as worship. It was during this time that the term "psalm" came to refer to any religious song, prayer, or poem greatly influenced by but not strictly following the original model. Zim explains:

> Seventeenth-century poets not only wrote new psalm paraphrases in the various forms of devotional lyric poetry but also wrote new religious lyrics influenced by that concept of the psalm as the most excellent form of poetry expressed by Sidney in *The Defense of Poesie.* Drayton's *Harmonie of the Church,* Herbert's *Temple* and Traherne's *Thanksgivings*, for example, may thus be described as "other psalms." (210)

In the eighteenth century, decades after Baxter first petitioned for an expanded Protestant repertoire, Isaac Watts began to compose hymns expressing the spirituality and personal applicability of the gospel outside the boundaries of psalm translation and even scriptural interpretation. The need for a distinct break from traditional psalmist rhetoric, rhyme, and meter seemed imperative to Watts because

> the most frequent Tempers and Changes of our Spirit, the Conditions of our Life . . . and the Breathings of our Piety expresst according to the Variety of our Passions . . . as they are refined into Devotion, and act under the Influence and Conduct of the Blessed Spirit; all conversing with God the Father by the new and living Way. (vii)

This acknowledgement of the potential for everyday human conditions to be "refined into Devotion" marks a critical shift in the way religion, human nature, and God Himself were conceived. Modern scholars often point to Watts' compositions as marking the turning point for the genre when non-scriptural poetry replaced psalmic conventions. What scholars have yet to consider is that Julia Palmer, a middle-class woman living in Westminster, composed a comparable poetics thirty years before Watts wrote his well-known hymns.

Palmer was likely familiar with Baxter's invitation to all Puritans to premeditate" new lyrics for congregational music—an invitation that opened the door for expression regardless of gender or class. Until this time, singing was the only "active vocal prophesying" allowed to women in church (Temperley 79)—an authority allotted to them by the very nature of collective worship: "Individual identities are temporarily suspended in the face of this collective voice that does not differentiate among its speakers. . . . Even the priest becomes interchangeable with the lay worshipper" (Targoff 33). Although all worshipers participated in praying and singing, men were responsible for composing the texts for collective worship, with a handful of notable aristocratic exceptions like Mary Sidney.

As the only surviving manuscript of its kind, Palmer's collection offers an exclusive look at one of the earliest examples of a new kind of public devotion—one of such a personal nature that it seems oblivious to its visibility. Clarke asserts that "Palmer is entirely concerned with her own spiritual experience, and the [personal tone] of the poetry is more like the eighteenth-century nonconformist hymn than anything published in the seventeenth century" (Introduction xiii). In fact, Clarke insinuates that Palmer's

Centuries may have inspired Isaac Watts. She reasons that if Palmer's poems "were being sung or read at Pinner's Hall in the early eighteenth century, as is quite possible, Watts might have encountered them: he led a congregation that met there, from 1704-1708" (xiv).

Like those of Watts, Palmer's hymns communicate a vastly more intimate relationship with and dependence on the divine than early psalm translations. Mary Sidney had previously achieved a deeply introspective tone in her psalms, but Palmer may have been the first to do so by relying more on experiential than scriptural authority. Almost like a transcripted dialogue between herself and God, Palmer's centuries with their intimate and emotional timbre more closely resemble the puritan spiritual journal than the other hymns composed during the Restoration period—a fact indicated by her careful dating and chronological ordering of each poem. Indeed, it would have required less effort to write a spiritual journal in prose, as was the trend, than to compose one in verse. Such a unique combination of forms—public hymn and personal diary—indicates not only the author's advanced perception of applicable religion but also her belief that individual spiritual experience could be transmitted as a benefit to others also journeying toward salvation. At the beginning of each century and repeatedly throughout, she stresses her intent of inviting others to praise and worship God with her:

> Let me by faith, behold and see
> The arms of love strectht out to me
>
> * * *
>
> That whilst, I, in thy praises soare
> Others may sweetly thee adore
>
> Let me such sweetnese leave behind
> That they, thy love, may bear in mind

And may have cause from what they see
To blese thee to eternity

Oh let me soe thy praises sing
That I may heavens work begin [I.40.15–16, 21–28]

Palmer intended her centuries not only to inspire others to devotion but to be used for collective devotion. For Palmer as for other seventeenth-century poets, there is "absolutely no opposition . . . between liturgy and inwardness" (Targoff 97). Most of the poems embody the three elements of common worship identified by Targoff: premeditation, interchangeability of personal pronouns, and reiterability. The following poem, for instance, exhibits all three characteristics:

We cannot tell whilst here
what we shall one day be
But when thou shalt again apear
we shall be like to thee

Thy glory, then shall dart
On us, iradiently
When we shall see thee, as thou art
and be, transform'd therby

Wee see now in our race
thy glory, somtimes beame
But then we shall see face, to face
and no cloud, intervene

A soull transforming sight
of thee whilst here below
I would desire, that soe I might
into, thy liknese grow

Still dayly, more, & more
in this imperfect state
Untill I come, through grace, to soare
to sights, imediate [II.92]

Palmer's premeditation, as opposed to spontaneity, in writing this poem, is confirmed by the poem's steady meter and fixed rhyme scheme. Although some of Palmer's poetry is spontaneous—it reads much more like a conversation and is characterized by uneven meter and inconsistent rhyme—most of the poems in the *Centuries* reflect the precision indicative of a conscious, premeditated approach. The simplicity of poetry like the example above allows a poem to take on any one of the popular contemporary melodies —an aid for memorizing and reiterating. Note also the seamless transition between the third and fourth stanzas from the first-person plural to the first-person singular. The fluidity with which Palmer moves from one to the other, sometimes multiple times in a single poem, shows her perception of private and public devotion as often being indistinguishable one from another.

However, sometimes Palmer's poems read more like spontaneous conversations with God than premeditated reiterable prayers or hymns. In fact, a few are far from being conducive for congregational use. For example, the enjambment in the following poem presents a major difficulty for someone attempting to sing:

> Thy holy day improve soe let
> me, that I grow apace
> Speeding to an immediate
> fruition of thy face [I.42.77–80]

In one or two poems, Palmer's experimentation with unusual metrical patterns renders collective participation practically impossible.

These more irregular poems remain the exceptions. Generally speaking, the poetic forms remain predictable and unpretentious (unlike the thought-provoking and sometimes surprising ideas exposed by such simplistic forms). Along with the stylistic

characteristics of so many of the poems, certain practical features indicate that Palmer clearly intended most of them to be sung. Clarke states that

> it may be significant that Palmer sometimes uses vertical lines characteristic of psalmbooks to show line divisions: this practice, which we have only seen elsewhere in manuscripts of Mary Sidney's psalm paraphrases, may indicate that Palmer is perceiving her writing as hymns rather than poetry—a distinction which would have been very important to her. (Introduction xix)

Clarke stops here without explaining why this distinction would have been important to Palmer. The conscious decision to set her poetry to music may in part be a result of what Webster characterizes as the "particularly intensely phonologocentric culture" of Puritanism. He asserts that in such a culture where speech largely is privileged over writing, "voice is associated with self-presence, truth, authenticity and by an immediate and transparent movement of meaning" (41). It is no wonder that these worshipers placed particular emphasis on the act of vocalized and collective devotion. In the scrutiny of personal worthiness and the exploration of the salvation paradigm, both the writing and vocalizing of spirituality provided security—a double validation. From the beginning, Palmer endows her poetry with a voice:

> Blessed spirit, doe thou endite
> Help me to *speak* thy praise
>
> That soe I may others envite
> To love thee all there days. [f. iv r, emphasis added]

She thus perceives her work as a text capable of producing the immediate power of vocalized expression and the lasting power of the written word. Her act of writing,

in effect, overcomes the weakness identified in the original debate over the efficacy of collective worship: that congregational devotional practices encourage outward performance and inward passivity. By composing personal meditations that others could adopt for public and private devotional purposes, Palmer moves her own devotional practice from passive to active.

"When the history of Elizabethan poetry comes to be written," Hallett Smith states, "it will be not so much a series of biographical sketches, with critical remarks thrown in from any random point of view, as a study of the great commonplaces, with accurate description of the variety of ways in which the treatment of them became art. One of these great commonplaces was the Book of Psalms" (271). A commonplace of a later age is the nonconformist hymn that evolved from the tradition of psalm translation. The progression of devotional development from psalm to hymn allowed Julia Palmer to combine an intimate poetics with a public and shared practice, thus generating her own form of collective devotion—one capable of promoting sociopolitical agendas as I will demonstrate in Chapter Four.

"When shall the reslese, lovesick soull thy sweet love comprehend": Politics and the Mystical Marriage Trope

In the wake of the religious and political reversals of 1660 when Parliament restored Charles II to the throne, Nonconformists endured the blows of revived persecution, felt most intensely through repressive legislation. Starting in 1661, the Clarendon Code forced the polarization of the Anglican Church and the Nonconformists, excluding the latter from public office and forbidding meetings of unauthorized worship, among other restrictions. Rather than extinguishing nonconformity, however, these measures only initiated the tightening of Puritan circles and increased their efforts to regain political tolerance.

At the height of these tensions in 1670, Julia Palmer began to compose her *Centuries,* an attestation to historian John Morrill's claim that "religious commitment is best observed in conditions of persecution" (quoted in Maltby 116). Even though an extensive amount of nonconformist writing occurred during this period, Palmer's manuscript is one of only a handful of documents that preserves a nonconformist woman's perspective of Restoration England.

Since religious and political conditions during the Restoration were inextricably tied, it is not surprising to find political and social currents embedded in religious writing, particularly in the simple non-rhetorical forms of poetry and spiritual journals considered suitable for pious women. James Daybell asserts that "women's spiritual writing was often written for public circulation with a wider significance than that of recording a woman's spiritual progress" (12). Undoubtedly, Palmer intended her work for a wide audience, but the few overt references she makes to current events by no means call for

outright rebellion. However, the very rhetoric of her poetry, dominated by imagery of her eventual marriage with Christ, holds the potential to be politically charged. For Palmer, as for her fellow Puritans, the allegory of marriage between Christ and his believers applies to all relationships—including that between church and state. This chapter aims to explore the significance of the mystical marriage trope and how despite its centrality in puritan doctrine, it affects men and women differently. We will also see how men and women exploit the trope in various ways either to maintain or regender socio-political norms, respectively.

Desiring God and Becoming the Bride of Christ

The mystical marriage trope permeates the *Centuries,* appearing in nearly each of Palmer's two hundred poems. Her overwhelming desire for union with Christ and the romantic, often erotic imagery employed to anticipate such a union can startle a modern reader:

> Dear Lord, away fain would I fly
> One smile from thee I crave
> That in thy bosom I might lye
> This is the thing I'de have
>
> * * *
>
> Enlighten me soe in my way
> That by thy rays devine
> I may be able, once to say
> Dear Jesus, thou art mine [I.9.1–4, 17–20]
>
> If thy back parts soe lovly be
> what is thy pleasent face
> Oh what hast thou, laid up for me
> in thy prepared place
>
> Oh if a glance far off be sweet
> And yeelds the soull soe much
> What joy, & comfort, shall we meet
> When we draw neer, & touch [I.97.1–8]

Neither the trope's sensuality nor its proliferation is unique to Palmer's poetry, however. Puritan writers, both women and men, took literally the notion of "desiring God," inspired by a long tradition of scriptural interpretation and commentary. Notably Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Calvin, among others, interpreted the Song of Songs and certain other biblical passages as Christ's wooing of his beloved: the Church and/or the individual soul. The theme of desiring God repeats itself so frequently in Puritan sermons, commentary, and other writing that "desire itself [became] a dominant way of articulating the knowledge of God, the surest test of human character, the authenticity of spiritual experience generally, and the very nature of prayer" (Lane 375). The pervasiveness of mystical marriage, according to Ivy Schweitzer, results from its association with the ultimate Christian objective:

> Conversion involves the transformation of all saints, male and female, into feminine vessels, emptied of self and filled with God. . . . The metaphor of the mystical marriage between Christ and his church, a union that extends to the individual soul, . . . is the figure favored by . . . Puritan ministers for expressing not only the resignation to be ruled and governed by God's will, required of saints for salvation, but also the rapturous joys they can expect in their union with Christ. The contemplation of this union, imagining oneself as the "Bride of Christ," prompts the most sensual writing in the Puritan canon. (23)

Fully exploited as a gendered metaphor, "the conversion drama . . . is unavoidably sexualized," explains Kimberly Johnson. "Its sequencing suggests nothing other than a logical progression from courtship to marriage to pregnancy and reproduction" (64). She

emphasizes, with help from David Leverenz, that "as with physical marriage, the end of this spiritual marriage was expected to be progeny: 'More crucial than the simile of intercourse in the marriage comparisons . . . is the fantasy of its fruition: the self's rebirth" (58).[1]

The total submission of body and soul to Christ required to achieve spiritual conversion, the self's rebirth, necessitates the renunciation of self, and like any good Puritan, Palmer expresses her self-abhorrence repeatedly throughout the *Centuries.* Her writing accounts for her efforts to cast away the "seed of pride" and the "fogs, & mists" of doubt [1.26.42, 47] that threaten her conversion. Schweitzer states that this process "of turning oneself from self to God regiments selfhood by attempting to obliterate the diversity of fallen selves and replace it with one single, absolute Self. It is a harrowing process, for it involves nothing less than a loathing, a denunciation, and finally an effacement of human and worldly selfhood" (8). Such a complete rejection of selfhood led Richard Baxter to exclaim that "the very names of Self and Own, should sound in the watchful Christian's ears as very terrible, wakening words, that are next to the names of sin and satan" (quoted in Bercovitch 18). That Christ could choose, love, and unite with

[1] Ivy Schweitzer further explains: "The metaphor of the soul's betrothal in marriage to Christ was so pervasive, according to Edmund S. Morgan, because 'marriage, which the Puritans regarded as the highest relationship between mortals, was generally accepted as the closest comparison to the believer's union with God' (*Puritan Family,* 162). . . . The Puritan clergy applied this basic metaphor to the whole gamut of spiritual relations. Like a lover, Christ wooed the soul, which resisted like a coy woman 'full of whorish and adulterous lusts' (John Cotton, *Practical Commentary upon John, 227;* quoted in Morgan, *Puritan Family,* 163). Ministers served as the 'friends' of the bridegroom who customarily helped arrange the match between the soul and Christ. Extending the metaphor to the entire Church community, John Cotton compared congregational worship to the sexual love of a married couple: 'The publick Worship of God is the bed of loves: where, 1. Christ embraceth the souls of his people, and casteth into their hearts the immortal seed of his Word, and Spirit, *Gal.* 4.19. 2. The Church conceiveth and bringeth forth fruits to Christ' (*A Brief Exposition . . . of Canticles,* 209; quoted in Morgan, *Puritan Family,* 164). Cotton's metaphor spiritualizes female physiology and applies it to the souls and hearts of the congregation, which become spiritual wombs impregnated by God's inseminating Word and bearing the new birth of conversion" (4).

such unworthy creatures as sinful mortals is a phenomenon believers did not attempt to explain yet did not take for granted. Palmer's diction reveals the extent to which she agonizes over this paradox. In a moment of intense distress, she expresses her unworthiness to be wed to Christ, amazed

> That thou shoudst cull out, such a worthlese bride
> For ever with thee, to live, & abide
> And fix thy tender love, thine hart, & eye
> Upon such blacknese, & deformity. [II.51.37–40]

The same imagery of worthlessness, blackness, and deformity is employed likewise to describe worldliness. Of necessity, if not wedded to Christ one is wedded to vain and foolish pleasures, and contempt for the world thus becomes a sub-motif of mystical marriage. Contrasting the purity, beauty, and virtue characteristic of a divine marriage is the wicked "enchantrese" who attempts to lure the soul away "with its suptle Charm" [I.23.1, 2]. In one of her many scathing attacks on worldliness, Palmer personifies the world as a diseased prostitute disguised by 'glit'ring glory':

> Alase, poor, empty, sory world
> where dos thy glory lye
> Out of thee, we shall all be hurld
> and ev'ry man must dye.
>
> What will thy glit'ring glory then
> Apear to us now here
> A thing of nought, empty, & vain
> thou shalt at last apear
>
> Att best thou art, a heap of rubish
> fit fewell for the flame
> In which thou speedyly shalt perish
> and where in then, thy fame
>
> Oh poor, blind, mortalls what d'e meane
> after this world to lag
> When passed over is the scene
> you'l see, t'was but a hag

* * *

Her plesures ar but short, & swift
not worth the taking up
And when shee seems thee up to lift
ther's pousen in her cup

* * *

Learn to cast of the world before
the time it casts of you
Your time, will shortly be no more
your days, att most are few

The closser you the world to hug
the more t'will prick, and smart
The harder att its breasts you tug
the worse t'will be to part [I.53.1–16, 21–24, 33–40]

The virgin-whore symbology,[2] abundant throughout Puritan writing, attests to the complexity of the mystical marriage ideology in which gender roles are not always straightforward: for any believer, male or female, the natural fallen *man* will yield to worldliness while the *feminine* soul will submit to Christ. The result of either scenario, however, is portrayed by conception imagery; Palmer invariably describes union with Christ as "full" and union with the world as "empty."

The gendered metaphor of mystical marriage—one that unabashedly feminized men—ironically existed at the very core of the Puritan mindset. How was such an attitude possible in a political, social, and even religious culture dominated by gender hierarchies? The answer lies in the fact that men and women perceived the trope differently and consequently used it to pursue different agendas.

[2] "'Woman's' social experiences with men form a catalogue of emblems for saints' experiences with God. As obedient wife, she is the emblem of the obedient servant, a figure of righteous passive desire; as adulterer, the figure of apostasy defiling herself by spurning God's love; as harlot, the unsaved pagan turning to other gods; as shrew, the rebel; as childbearer, the evangelist; as nurse and midwife, the preacher. . . . Woman is also, in herself, a constant threat to a believer's focus on God and the things of God. Thus woman's experience is appropriated as emblematic of man's relations with God, but as woman she interferes with those relations" (Schweitzer 16).

Socio-Political Manipulation of the Metaphor: Male versus Female

Clearly, the universal feminization of believers presents some provocative issues, especially if the saint happens to be male. For a man "with the prospects of becoming a husband himself, or a father, the conventional expectations for his social behavior come into sharp conflict with the spiritual requirements of his orthodox belief" (Schweitzer 24). Social tradition and expectation instructed men to be assertive, decisive, dominant, and self-reliant. On the other hand,

> if true conversion is characterized by the soul's feminization, self-examination for signs of conversion reveals properly feminine traits, including submissiveness, receptivity, and "strong love and affections" toward the Bridegroom. But if self-examination does not reveal such signs, [Puritan leaders urge] those who doubt their [mark of election] to, in essence, *act Bridal*—that is, to demonstrate to God their willingness to be the Bride by adopting her submissive, self-emptying posture. [3] (Johnson 61)

Such counterintuitive behavior of fostering feminine traits—and adopting them if they be lacking—was an uncomfortable prospect for most men within the spiritual realm, not to mention socially dangerous and physically impossible. Mystical marriage would certainly undermine existing social structures if taken literally outside the religious sphere by

[3] In her discussion of the process of feminization within the Puritan paradigm, Schweitzer asks a pointed question that remains important but cannot be addressed within the scope of this paper: "If 'woman' served as a figure for the regenerate soul, and if womanly functions such as marrying, giving birth, and mothering were used to describe spiritual processes, why were women and their functions not elevated and ennobled by this use? Clearly, women who fit the Pauline model were applauded, but the effect of approving women for being self-effacing would, presumably, be merely more and better self-effacement. In fact, only a certain scripturally defined and culturally approved notion of 'woman' served as the typology of regenerate subjectivity" (27).

puritan men. Why, then, would it be encouraged and even deemed necessary for salvation?

Men could accept and even embrace the implications of mystical marriage, Schweitzer concludes, because "the spiritualization of feminine imagery had the effect of erasing the earthly and fleshly femaleness from it. Puritan men appropriated female imagery, but only as a necessary phase on the way to the remasculinization offered by the puritan conversion narrative in which, ultimately, God adopts the saint as his son and heir and woman/women disappear" (27). Despite traumatic phases of spiritual regendering, this masculine end definitively resolves the problematics of mystical marriage for men and renders the metaphor exploitable for the justification of male authority.

Puritan preachers and laymen employed the mystical marriage trope in two ways: first, as a representation of divine influence in social and political constructs; and second, as a validation for the well-established gender hierarchies within those constructs. With the Pauline doctrine that decrees the man to be head of the wife (1 Corinthians 11:3) just as Christ is head of the Church, Puritan men rationalized authority, sometimes even supremacy, over their wives, often forgetting the central element of self-sacrifice demonstrated by Christ who suffered all and ultimately gave his life for his bride, the Church. Because of men's predominance in public speech and public writing, the masculine vision of mystical marriage—that in the end could be used to uphold traditional gender roles—was widespread and enduring.[4]

[4] Early modern men and modern critics alike tend to consider mystical marriage strictly from a male perspective. This remains, to a great extent, a fundamental oversight in both the approach toward and the conclusions about the Puritan conversion process. Schweitzer points out that "for most historians of the Puritan experience, the question of whether that experience differed for women, nonwhites, or different classes, let alone *how* it differed, has not been an issue. Hambrick-Stowe, for example, recognizes and even decries the dearth of available material written by Puritan women, but he justifies his generalizing about Puritan modes of devotion from male-authored texts by invoking David D. Hall's notion of 'collective

Identifying with the bride of Christ proves far less disjunctive for females than for males as "there is little positional discontinuity from a Puritan woman's social to her spiritual life; she is expected to submit willingly to an earthly husband as well as to a heavenly one" (24). Whereas men were forced to reconcile the disparate roles dictated to them by religion and society, women began the conversion process already aligned with accepted cultural mores and possessing the characteristics necessary for salvation. The problem that mystical marriage poses for women is not the nature of the metaphor itself but the gendering of the metaphor in reverse: conversion was taught through a male perspective, and no one seemed aware that a woman's conversion process might require modification, or that it might require a different process altogether.

> Unable to ascertain what role, if any, women played in the articulation of the official collective fantasy, we can nevertheless determine with certainty that some Puritans, probably around half the population, were already women. . . . [David] Leverenz speaks as if all Puritans were men and examples of the classic obsessional neurotic son of the Freudian "family romance." Can this be a women's fantasy? Can women dream of becoming what they already are? According to Puritan doctrine, everyone, male and female, young and old, was in desperate need of a radical transformation of his or her very being. Females, however, begin the process of salvation already feminized, in a manner of speaking, as part

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mentality' (5 n. 2). Furthermore, 'in matters of devotion,' he concludes, 'lines of class were inconsequential' (4). In a new study of the psychology of the Puritan religious experience, Charles L. Cohen also notices the uniformity in Puritan religious discourse, which, he says, results from 'the language in which preachers explicated the *ordo salutis*. . . . Theologians,' he continues, 'assumed that a single dynamic of regeneration governs all conversions, an asseveration confirmed in the testimonies of the Elect. The experience of grace submerges the peculiarities of gender' (223)" (14). Schweitzer argues that class and gender did in fact affect the Puritan experience in crucial ways and that conversion cannot be so easily universalized as consigning it to a generalized process would allow.

> of their social, cultural, and familial gender role conditioning. (Schweitzer 18–19)

Recent studies, particularly those of Schweitzer and Longfellow, reveal how women's writing of mystical marriage conveys distinctly feminine dynamics of conversion—a phenomenon that for the first time allows seventeenth-century women to create "a perspective from which they write that is theirs. . . . Women write from a position that they define, a distinct place within the discourses. . . . Women's [writing] before the seventeenth century . . . is hardly distinguishable from that of men. But . . . a definite female voice begins to be heard: women . . . turn discourse to their needs" (Williamson 18). By no means is this "definite female voice" a radical one—at least not within the vast majority of women's texts still in existence today. In fact, the opposite holds true for women like Julia Palmer, Anna Trapnel, and the author of *Eliza's Babes* whose texts can even be read as religiously conservative. Reading these early modern women alongside their male contemporaries "suggests far more exciting conclusions than reading [their works] in opposition to men: that the most radical elements of [their texts] are not unique, but are in fact constructed out of a conventional and orthodox tradition" (Longfellow 62).

In her study of early modern religious writing, Longfellow acknowledges the distinctive space seventeenth-century women began to define largely through their use of the mystical marriage trope. However, even among themselves they employed it differently. Avoiding the temptation to universalize the metaphor's application among all seventeenth-century women writers, Longfellow proposes that some

> seized upon the fluidity of gender in mystical marriage scriptures in order to claim authority for their own religious writing. . . . [Some] use their metaphorical identity as the bride of Christ to justify their politically and socially subversive speech. . . . [Some] use mystical marriage in much the same way as men, as a means of talking not about human marriage but about divine providence in human institutions. (3–4)

Palmer uses the trope for all three of these purposes, but whether she always does so consciously can be debated—an ambiguity that shrouds the potentially subversive features of her writing.

As a wife, a woman holds no legal authority, and her husband must take responsibility for her actions. Rather than protesting the dependency women have on their husbands, Palmer shows how such dependency can be empowering. Ironically, it is complete submission that gives her access to all that her husband, Christ, has, including his authority.[5] Repeatedly throughout the *Centuries*, Palmer legitimizes her poetry by asserting she is given poetic utterance through heavenly authority, inspiration, and permission:

> I would frequently from thee hear
> Untill thou doe, thy self appear.
>
> And fecth me, from this sinfull state
> To enjoyment. immediate

[5] Elizabeth Clarke shows how mystical marriage posed a political threat. "Robert Ferguson, in *The Interest of Reason in Religion* (1675), identified a political intent in the reluctance of Church of England theologians to recognise the metaphorically encoded union of believers with Christ: 'by our *Fellowship with Christ* which the Sacred Writers so Emphatically speak of, we are told there is only meet such a Political Union, as is betwixt a Prince and his Subjects, between Superiours, and Inferiors.' In fact, it was the immediate union of Christ and believer that Tory Anglicans considered 'political': it could give a beggar—or indeed a woman—unmediated access to the divine, with alarming consequences. [Women's] spiritual journals celebrate that access in a *defiantly egalitarian* manner" (Microhistory 221–222, emphasis added).

oh give me leave, to speak out plain
I would not flatter, lye, or fein

Love letters, will not serve the turn
Come thou thy self, or else I burn [II.100.1–8]

She asks her divine husband for leave "to speak out plain" of her love for him, suggesting a familiarity and a privacy only possible within a close relationship. The petitionary stance of this phrase proves her submission to Christ, and his authorization of her speech renders unnecessary the need to obtain permission from anyone else. The tone of the poem likewise signifies closeness to Christ: she frankly informs him that frequent "love letters" are not good enough but that she expects to be fetched into his actual presence. By revealing the intimate nature of their relationship—one of submissive wife who completely depends on her husband's absolute authority—she establishes her claim to Christ's authority. In another poem, she describes being "linkt by holy art" [II.34.30] to Christ whenever he inspires her words—provocative imagery of how they share in the act of artistic creation. Her poetry thus becomes a "holy art" that no person can object to without directly challenging God himself.

Even more defensive is her declaration that to speak the praises of her divine husband is an inescapable duty; to remain silent would be to commit sin:

What means this sinfull. modesty
Which maketh me, most times, soe shy
To speak how good thou art
when soe I might
others envite
To come, and take a part

Who wilt thou speak for, oh my soull
If not for him, whose thou art whole
why then art thou so loth
for to begin

to speak of him
And set his glory forth

Canst thou another. object find
More sutable unto thy mind
That thou dost not delight
of him always
To speak the praise
Unto thine utmost might

Is this the reason. ‘cause thine hart
Within, is the most baren part
If that with god weare fild
thou wouldst alway
from day, to day
To speak of him be skild

Canst thou pretend, to be the friend
Of Christ, and not still att one end
Of thy discourse find place
to speak somthing
of that sweet king
And of his love, and grace

Somtimes thou fearst hipocrisie
When cecreet prid, thou dost espy
And soe to speak art loth
resovlving wroung
to hold thy tounge
And silent, be henceforth

Wherby thou dost but gratifie
The devil thy grand enemy
Before thou art a ware
Therfore goe on
Through grace alone
And break thou, through this snare

Tis thou Lord, must open my lips
That I may not, thy grace eclips
And make me readyly
to speak of thee.
As I shall see
Fitt oputunity [I.93]

She repents of her "sinfull modesty" that oftentimes prevents her from speaking the words that would "envite" others to come to know and love Christ, reasoning that if she were continually filled with God she would always be "skild" in her praises. Indeed, to hold her tongue gratifies the devil. That she not be accused of silently withholding her praise, she writes two hundred poems—a prolific number compared to that of her contemporaries. Palmer capitalizes on her association with Christ as his bride, imposing his stamp of authority on her poetry. As a result, no godly person can question the appropriateness of the *Centuries.*

With the ingenious utilization of mystical marriage to appropriate authority to their writing, women created a protected space in which subversive speech could at once be voiced and remain blameless.[6] These women writers

> inherited an orthodox language through which they could construct devotional subject positions. For many women writers, . . . the imaginative use of metaphor opened up new interpretative possibilities which enabled them to contribute to debates about gender and devotion. For these women, the facility of the mystical marriage metaphor lay in being able to do what the men do not: to connect human and divine, to demonstrate how marriage to Christ authorises their speech as human women. These women utilise the gaps in the metaphor that are frequently denied or elided by male writers in order to imagine, more literally, what it meant for a

[6] Clarke explains that "conformity to stereotypes of femininity was crucial to the communication of any political opinion at all, and this gendering extended to choice of rhetorical form and style. The power of the manuscript, rather than residing in the political influence of the individual woman, who becomes less important both in the ideology and the practice of a more popular politics, resides in features such as the rhetoric of providential deliverance from persecution and accident, and the use of tropes such as the author as the Bride of Christ" (Microhistory 224).

> woman to be the bride of Christ. The possibilities of interpretative play opened up by mystical marriage enabled these women radically to redefine gender roles using entirely orthodox language. (Longfellow 58)

In one of the most interesting of Palmer's poems, an unexpected use of gendered imagery magnifies the complexity of gender roles within spirituality. She asks,

> Mad world, why dost thus mistake
> To think that true. religion
> Doth soe unman us, as to make
> Us lumps of stupifaction
>
> Wee must to pleasures. bid adeiw
> And say to Joy, and mirth be gone
> And this is all, that doth acrew
> If th' world may be the Judg alone
>
> But wisdome, is, Justified,
> of all her Children, which doe mind
> Her. they find, they ar by her led
> To pleasures, unmix'd, & refin'd
>
> Goe on, my soull, goe on, I say
> In the strength of thy dearest Lord
> And in that strength, sweetly obey
> And still his love, & praise record [I.82.1–16]

Although Palmer claims up front that "true religion" does not "unman" its believers—it is even "mad" to believe this is possible—the rest of the poem seems to imply that it does just that for men. Palmer personifies the "wisdome" that leads to true religion as a wife and mother—not as a man. The mother assumes a masculine role: Wisdom's "Children . . . doe mind" her and respect her authority. In Palmer's submissively feminine petition to rely on God's strength and "sweetly obey" him—adhering to the requirements of true religion—she is more masculine than a worldly man who, in his own wisdom, rejects religion and is thus "unmanned" as a lump of "stupifaction." According to her underlying

logic, masked by her initial argument, men become feminine either by rejecting or by embracing religion, but religious women become masculine by accepting it. The exploitation of this gender instability allows for a reversal of the remasculinization narrative and a subversive redefining of gender characteristics.

Other dissident ideas appear as a result of Palmer's surprising literalization of the marriage trope. Her boundless love for Christ alone supercedes all other social obligations. In one poem she rejects the affections of a mortal admirer, challenging the required social and religious institution of physical marriage:

> Oh teach me Lord, the holy art
> To set this world far from my hart
> Then may I, to it say
> My hart's reserved for another
> Dearer to mee then any brother
> You may, then goe your way [I.7.31–36]

It is not known if Palmer was married or not, but it does not matter. A mortal husband may own her body but not her heart or soul. Like the author of *Eliza's Babes*, Palmer "reserves" her heart for her divine husband alone.[7] Despite her rejection being socially subversive since wives were expected to submit all to their husbands, no committed Puritan can but respect such absolute devotion to Christ, even at the expense of social conformity.

"Lest we believe that all women were primarily concerned with gender issues," Longfellow points out that "women as well as men could use gendered metaphors to discuss ungendered subjects, whether the true form of the English Church or the future of the English Republic" (58). At least in Palmer's estimation, the entities of religion and politics are indistinguishable from one another, a concept reflected by marriage imagery

[7] See Longfellow's chapter entitled, "Public worship and private thanks in *Eliza's Babes.*"

described in political terms and political imagery described in matrimonial terms. For example, Palmer's diction often includes the words *king, sovereign, crown, glory, kingdom, victory, liberty, tyranny, oppression,* and *corruption* in connection with bridal imagery. The opposite also holds true; "the use of courtly love epithets for Christ was part of a very long tradition of English allegory sprinkled liberally through sermons and devotional works in the seventeenth century" (139), and the terms of the marriage trope underlie Palmer's understanding of all puritan doctrines That her loyalty to a nonwordly king and kingdom supersedes submission to any earthly institution is supported by the fact that her politically charged terms invariably have a point of reference centered in the divine marriage union.

The most common Judeo-Christian rhetoric, including that found in the Bible itself, usually depicts human events, institutions, and people as types of their spiritual counterparts, but the marriage trope often reverses this tradition, making mystical marriage a symbol for physical occurrences. For example, Palmer uses Christ's Second Coming to foreshadow a nonconformist reclamation of political power:

> Thou'lt shortly see him, set upon
> the top of Zion hill
> Mounted as king upon his throne
> his foes, to crush, and kill [I.86.45–48]
>
> * * *
>
> The longest day, will have an end
> In time, the prison walls will down
> And then the pris'nor, shall ascend
> To take posesion, of the Crown [I.60.37–40]

Perhaps the most blatantly rebellious of Palmer's poems refers to overthrowing the crown of the Restoration monarchy that "hangs" threateningly over nonconformist believers:

See what hangs o're thy head
A glorious crown
And wilt thou here, upon the bed
of sloth, and ease, ly down
And not gett up for to possese
This glorious crown of hapinese

Make hast unto the goall
tis for a prize
Why sitst thou in this durty hold
as listlese to arise
For shame, my soull, make hast, & run
Apace, until the prize be won [II.52.19–30]

However mutinous the implications of the poem may be, Palmer could easily retreat into the innocence of the salvation paradigm if confronted about its political meaning: the private instruction of her own soul to "make hast" to "possese this glorious crown of hapinese" that awaits the faithful saint is completely justifiable, even admirable and sacred.

Regardless of whether or not a woman's use of mystical marriage makes claims on authority, hides subversive speech, or promotes political symbolism, "the use of imaginative language in devotional writing would have profound significance for the relationship of women's writing to orthodox theological texts" (Longfellow 31). Traditionally consigned to private domains, women employed the mystical marriage trope within conventional and purportedly inspired religious texts in order to manipulate the tension between public and private spheres and claim authoritative positions in each. Longfellow assesses this manipulation that can be identified in critical readings of *Eliza's babes*, and the same assessment also can be made of Palmer's *Centuries.*

> In essence, "private" and "public" devotion is the same act with the same end; the difference is only a matter of degree. Viewed in such a

> framework, as she obviously intends it to be, [her] public act of publishing her writing cannot earn her the charge of immodesty. . . .
>
> Equating one's own words with Christ's was, of course, a defence any Christian could use, and hundreds of preachers defended . . . their sermons through similar conceits. What is fascinating about Eliza's framework is the added element of gender, or rather, perhaps, the absence of it. Hers is a very backhanded form of transgression, one that refuses to engage with the meanings of "private" and "public" that would open a woman author to the persecutions feared by Anna Trapnel. Instead, Eliza effaces those gendered definitions of public and private, creating a new, internally consistent paradigm in which her book serves as an act of devotion and must be judged as such, regardless of the author's gender. (136–37)

Key to the success of women's involvement in seventeenth-century gender debates is the "absence" of gender and a refusal to acknowledge the socially dictated notions of public and private. The claim of modesty and divine inspiration justifies the penetration of Palmer's poetry into the domain of public consumption; she presents the *Centuries* as a gift, literally and figuratively—an exclusive glimpse into her most private and cherished spiritual experiences that of necessity must be shared since they will benefit all who read. Dutiful participation in leading souls to Christ and salvation seems to leave Palmer no choice but to allow the publication of her private writings. Longfellow makes an important observation about this blurred distinction between public and private realms that results as a consequence. She states that

> careful examination of the theology of public and private religious action reveals that private godliness existed on a continuum with public devotion and speech, and that, for men at least, each was expected to feed the other. For women, the connections between public and private meant that it was possible to negotiate a space which occupied both realms at once: a paradigm most visible in the experiences of women such as Anna Trapnel and Sarah Wright, attracting attention while lying prone on their beds. (151)

Likewise, Palmer attracts attention while conducting the rigorous and intensely private introspection required of personal meditation. By simultaneously occupying public and private realms in this manner, Palmer, Trapnel, Wright, and others demonstrate "that it was possible for women to participate in [gender] debates not by defying restrictive standards of public and private behaviour but by exploiting their instability" (179).

By beginning the task of looking critically at Julia Palmer's *Centuries,* this thesis participates in the liminal status of the work. Both contemporary and modern circulation of Palmer's spiritual journal—her collection of conventionally private utterances—leads to its public consumption. Such engagement with Palmer's lyrics reflects how the public sphere becomes a function of interpretation and vice-versa. The mystical marriage trope, with its implications for advancing private spirituality and public and political identity, highlights a text "posed between self-deprecation and emboldened speech, private faith and public preaching" (168). As inspired lyrics and personal meditations worthy of being adopted as shared forms of common worship, Palmer's *Centuries* prove highly conducive for widespread projection of potentially subversive

notions embedded within the mystical marriage trope, allowing Palmer to participate in a reorientation of women's textuality through a regendering of public and private spheres.

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