3

‘A worme most abjekte’: Sermo Humilis as Reformation Strategy in Katherine Parr’s Prayers or Medytacions

Katherine Parr’s reputation as the wife who ‘survived’ Henry VIII was secured, in part, by the spectacular performance of obedience and submission she staged before the king and his councilors when, in 1545, she was targeted with accusations of conspiracy and treason by the conservative Bishop of Winchester, Stephen Gardiner. Pleading that as a wife and woman, she submitted absolutely to her husband and king, Parr put into physical practice the sermo humilis, or humble style, which also characterized her publication in the same year of Prayers stirring the mynd vnto heauenlye medytacions, usually referred to by its 1547 title, Prayers or Medytacions. Translating the third book of Thomas à Kempis’s Imitatio Christi (c. 1441), Parr presented the monologue of a generic ‘creature’ in place of her source text’s dialogue between man and God, establishing in that process a unique space for private feminine devotion in the emerging vernacular literature of the English Reformation Church. By employing humility topoi which referred obliquely to contemporary cultural discourses of women’s weakness, she moreover presented the devout woman’s relationship to God as the most humble, and therefore the most appropriate approach to ‘heauenlye medytacion.’ Parr takes this reformation of continental Catholic precedents one dramatic step further, when in her ‘Praier for the king,’ one of several original prayers she appendes to her translation, she constructs her position as Henry’s wife as the palimpsest for the subject’s relationship to the sovereign. In doing so, I will argue, Parr both articulates a radical reformulation of responsibility for the newly proclaimed head of the Church of England and opens up a new space for women’s devotional expression that expanded the as yet nascent possibilities for spiritual equality being advanced by Reformation theology.
Sermo humilis, the humble or low style, rejects the conscious use of rhetoric. Nevertheless it is not – manifestly – an absence of style but rather one particular kind of style. Cicero first coined the term in De Oratore, where he outlines three levels of style (grand, low, and intermediate) and the range of subjects that are appropriate to them. In De Doctrina Christiana, St Augustine challenged Cicero’s typology. A skilled exponent of classical rhetoric himself, his own conversion nevertheless drove him to adapt its strictures to the tenets of early Christianity and address the contemporary reservations about the low style and the ‘vulgarisms’ of the Greek Bible. While it was sometimes conflated with ‘ordinary speech,’ Augustine maintained that sermo humilis was more ordered and coherent than regular conversation, being characterized by carefully chosen vocabulary and variation. Sermo humilis, he asserted, was that style ‘in which the most sublime matters could be treated in the most matter of fact manner with the humblest prose and through the lowest of characters.’

For humanists in the English Reformation, sermo humilis took on the stature of an overarching principle. The English vernacular stood in relation to Latin and Greek in a position analogous to the distinction between Cicero’s low and high styles. The vast vernacularizing project of the Reformation could in this sense be seen as the wide-scale translation of newly recovered classical texts into sermo humilis. For proto-Protestants, this project was doubly urgent. Erasmus’s famous clarion call in Paraclesis (1516): ‘I wold to god, the plowman wolde singe a texte of the scripture at his plowbeme / And that the wever at his lowme / with this wold drive away the tediousness of tyme,’ was fervently embraced by the Reformist cause (from which he endeavored to distance himself), leading in England to the ambitious agenda of Tyndale, Cromwell, and Cranmer, among others, to translate Latin biblical texts into English. Cicero’s seemingly arcane discussion of rhetorical decorum became, in sixteenth-century England, literally a matter of life and death: Christians from all stations of life and from both sides of the religious divide were prepared to die (and often did) defending their attitude to sermo humilis.

Until recently, the roles played by women in the English Reformation have been notoriously neglected in mainstream literary criticism. Susan Wabuda argues forcefully that while Erasmus’s farmer and his plough, the weaver and his shuttle have received ongoing critical attention, his female counterpart, the woman and the rock, has elicited relatively little interest. This seems a startling oversight when we consider that in no other period of English history did one king’s consorts (to take