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# The poetics of “making” in the manuscript writings of Constance Aston Fowler

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues that the manuscript writings and compilations of the Catholic gentlewoman, Constance Aston Fowler (died 1664), offer a rich and hitherto overlooked corpus for broadening our understanding of the tradition of early modern English poetic “making” and *poesis*. During the 1630s, Fowler wrote a series of letters to her brother, the poet, Herbert Aston, and also compiled a manuscript miscellany at her home in Staffordshire. By analyzing the woman-inclusive and pro-Catholic ways in which Fowler and her coterie reworked the theories of *poesis* foregrounded by hegemonic male writers such as Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and John Donne, this essay proposes that the culture of early modern Anglophone poetic “making” was not simply male, humanist and Protestant, but female, provincial and Catholic.

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## Introduction

In 2009 Margaret Healy and Thomas Healy urged scholars to recover the Renaissance senses of “making” – they argued that this recovery would facilitate a more accurate and historically nuanced understanding of early modern conceptions of writing. They justify this clarion call by proposing that the words “maker”, “make” and “making” (rather than “author” and “authorship”) were the terms deployed by early modern writers to describe literary creativity.<sup>1</sup> According to S. K. Heninger, one of the seminal texts that laid the theoretical foundations for literary “making” in early modern England was Philip Sidney’s treatise, *An Apology for Poetry or The Defence of Poesy* (c. 1580; printed 1595).<sup>2</sup> Sidney posits that the word “poet” derives from the Greek *poiein*, which is “to make”. He implies that there is something lofty and transcendental about the term “maker” – it is a “high and incomparable” title. Indeed, Sidney goes on to foreground a kinship between the human poet-maker and his celestial Maker, God:

give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry [...] our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is.<sup>3</sup>

Here Sidney utilizes the terms “Maker”/“maker”, “made” and “maketh” to draw a parallel between God’s divine “making” and the material “making” of the earthly poet. Heninger

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finds within the *Apology* a specifically Protestant poetics of “making”, evinced in Sidney’s representation of the biblical prophet-poet, David:

David’s Psalms are a divine poem [...] he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts’ joyfulness, and hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith.

David’s dual earthly and divine power is captured in the punning use of the phrase “he maketh you”, which in the concrete sense means “causes you”, but also points to David’s spiritual-material making of “heavenly poesy”. The theologically Protestant nuance in this passage (as Heninger points out) occurs in the phrase “the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith”.<sup>4</sup> This recalls the Lutheran maxim, *sola fide* (justification by faith alone).<sup>5</sup> Sidney appropriates the notion of *poesis* (“he maketh you”) and applies it to a Protestant context (“only cleared by faith”). As we shall see, Sidney was not alone in this Protestant manipulation of *poesis* – Spenser and Donne also contributed to this Protestant culture of “making”.

But did early modern English Catholic writers utilize the concept of “poet as maker”? This is an important question to ask now given the recent attempts by scholars such as Alison Shell, Anne Sweeney, Gary Kuchar and Jenna Lay to reintegrate Catholic poetics into Protestant literary histories.<sup>6</sup> This essay addresses this hitherto unexplored question by examining the manuscript writings and compilations of the provincial Catholic gentlewoman, Constance Aston Fowler (died 1664). I argue that Fowler and her predominantly Catholic coterie appropriated and adapted the theories of poetic “making” and *poesis* put forward by Sidney, Spenser and Donne to suit their own literary practices. I propose that Fowler and her coterie played with the discourse of “making” to delineate the creative art of occasional poets; transcendental poet-muses; and scribes of verse. Significantly, in Fowler’s manuscript miscellany (compiled during the 1630s) we find a pronounced strand of devotional “making” that does not derive from Protestant writers such as Sidney, but takes as its principal source of inspiration the works of the Jesuit, Robert Southwell. As will be demonstrated, what is remarkable about Fowler’s miscellany is that it places Catholic women writers at the centre of literary “making”, vividly captured in the poems “To My Honer’d sister G A” (which depicts Fowler’s sister, Gertrude Aston Thimelby, as a sublime woman poet-maker) and “On the Passion of our Lord and sauior Iesus” (which foregrounds Fowler’s role as an inventive scribe devising a feminized form of spiritual-material “weau[ing]” and “mak[ing]” [4, ll. 186, 274]).<sup>7</sup> Examining the woman-inclusive and pro-Catholic ways in which Fowler and her coterie reworked the hegemonic discourses of “making” forces us to reconsider the history of the “poet as maker”: the tradition of English literary “making” is not simply male, humanist and Protestant, but provincial, domestic, Catholic, male and female.

### Defining literary “making”

According to Margaret Healy and Thomas Healy, “making” in the early modern period pertained both to the composition of literary works and to the multilayered process of literary production: the material scribbling, compiling and recording of texts.<sup>8</sup> In 1530

the dictionary compiler, John Palsgrave, wrote: “I Compyle I make a boke as an auctour dothe”.<sup>9</sup> Palsgrave juxtaposes “Compyle”, “make” and “auctour” to foreground his role as a compiler. Palsgrave’s use of the verb “to make” finds resonance in Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), which according to Heninger was a key text (alongside the *Apology*) for establishing poetic “making” as a phenomenon in early modern England.<sup>10</sup> In the April eclogue of the *Calender*, Spenser’s narrator describes an “occasion” in which the shepherd, Hobbinoll, recounts a song “made” by the poet, Colin:

Whereby he taketh occasion, for prooffe of his more excellencie and skill in poetrie, to recorde a songe, which the sayd Colin sometime made in honor of her Majestie.<sup>11</sup>

Spenser’s narrator draws attention to the verb “made” here – in the gloss of words to the April eclogue we find the following statement: “To make) to rime and versifye. For in this word making, our olde Englishe Poetes were wont to comprehend all the skil of Poetrye, according to the Greeke woorde ποιειν [*poiein*] to make”.<sup>12</sup> The “occasion” that is “made” in the April eclogue, however, involves numerous agents: the composer of the lay, Colin, and the “recorde[r]” of the song, Hobbinoll. Judith Owens posits that Spenser’s narrator’s ambivalent use of pronouns in the above-cited introduction to the eclogue: “he taketh occasion”; “his more excellencie and skill in poetrie”, collapses the roles of the poet, Colin, with that of the reciter of verse, Hobbinoll.<sup>13</sup> *Poesis* is not configured here as a singular act shaped by the poet, Colin, but as a collective endeavour that includes the “recorde[r]”, Hobbinoll.

Scholars such as Andrew Hadfield have read *The Shepheardes Calender* as a pro-Protestant allegorical political text that critiques Elizabeth I’s proposed marriage to the French Catholic, the Duke of Alençon.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Spenser’s narrator warns in the May eclogue:

the protestaunt beware, howe he geveth credit to the unfaythfull Catholique: whereof we have dayly proofes sufficient, but one moste famous of all, practised of Late yeares in Fraunce by Charles the nyth.<sup>15</sup>

As Paul McLane points out, this is a reference to the killing of Protestants in the St. Bartholomew’s day massacre. Spenser’s narrator here emphasizes the untrustworthiness of French Catholics such as Charles IX and (by implication) his younger brother, Alençon.<sup>16</sup> But is there anything specifically Protestant about Spenser’s portrayal of *poesis* and poetic “making”? The envoy that closes the *Calender* provides evidence of Spenser’s pro-Protestant poetics:

Loe I have made a Calender for every yeare,  
That steele in strength, and time in durance shall outweare:  
And if I marked well the starres revolution,  
It shall continewe till the worlds dissolution.<sup>17</sup>

As Heninger observes, Spenser’s poet-speaker here states that he has made a calendar that is “applicable to every year, to any unit of time, and therefore it is atemporal and will outlast steel”. The symbol of the “Calender” (as Heninger points out) was represented in some early printed almanacs as a signifier for the cosmos: the universe as an ordered and harmonious system created by God. Spenser’s poet-speaker (according to Heninger) has taken for his pattern God’s “Calender” or cosmos and imposed it upon the raw material of his own literary creation.<sup>18</sup> God’s making of the cosmos – his calendar – mirrors

Spenser's poet-speaker's making of his literary calendar. Both God and Spenser's poet-speaker have the power to make and create: "Loe I have made a Calender for every yeare". But as Paul McLane and Mary Parmenter argue, during the 1570s the word "calendar" was laden with religio-political significance. Between 1578 and 1580 Pope Gregory suggested that England's calendar should conform to that of the continent. Some English Protestants objected to the Pope's proposals and the Roman jurisdiction over England.<sup>19</sup> By claiming in 1579 to have "made" his own "Calender", Spenser's poet-speaker foregrounds his literary and divine agency – an agency that appears to resist and exist separately from papal domination. *Poesis* for Spenser here, I would suggest (following McLane and Parmenter), is loaded with a Protestant political nuance.

If we turn to John Donne's sermons we find further evidence of a Protestant poetics of "making". In the *Apology*, Sidney had likened the poet-maker to an alchemist in his ability to create golden worlds: "Her [Nature's] world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden".<sup>20</sup> This alchemical language is echoed by Donne in a 1623 sermon which describes the biblical Psalms as "Metricall compositions [...] the whole frame of the Poem is a beating out of a piece of gold".<sup>21</sup> According to Donne, God, too, is an alchemical maker, as outlined in the Easter Monday sermon of 1622: "God can work in all metals and transmute all metals: he can make a Moral man, a Christian; and a Superstitious Christian, a sincere Christian; a Papist, a Protestant". For Donne, David's alchemical making of the Psalms resembles God's alchemical power. But Donne's Easter Monday sermon contains a Protestant religious bias: to experience divine spiritual-material "making", Catholics must be open to conversion. This point is reiterated at the end of the sermon where Donne censures the "right handed Atheism in the stubborn Papist" – Donne's God may be receptive to converting Catholics, but some of them remain "stubborn".<sup>22</sup> As the Healy's observe, Donne's sermons "wonderfully captur[e] the mingling of spiritual ideas with material forms".<sup>23</sup> This is certainly the case. But the spiritual-material "making" foregrounded in Donne's 1622 Easter Monday sermon is influenced by a Protestant partiality.

But could the theories of Renaissance Anglophone literary "making" be appropriated and reworked by early modern English Catholic writers? Examining the writings of one of the most influential sixteenth-century Catholic authors, Robert Southwell, is a good starting point for addressing this question. As Alison Shell points out, Southwell could have read a copy of Sidney's *Apology* in manuscript, but did he engage with the notion of "poet as maker"?<sup>24</sup> In his preface to *Saint Peters Complaint* (1595), Southwell uses the term "making" twice: first, to castigate the outputs of secular love poets ("Poets by abusing their talent, and making the follies and fayninges of loue, the customary subiect of their base endeouers"); and secondly, to praise the verse of the sacred poet, Christ: "Christ himselfe by making a Himne, the conclusion of his last Supper, and the Prologue to the first Pageant of his Passion, gaue his Spouse a methode to immitate".<sup>25</sup> Southwell contends that Christian writers should imitate the divine poet, Christ, and engage entirely with devotional "making". Southwell, in this preface, goes on to recruit a metaphor of weaving to encourage his readers to compose religious verse: "to weaue a new webbe in their owne loome; I haue heere layd a few course threds together, to inuite some skillfuller wits to goe forward in the same".<sup>26</sup> Here Southwell appears to be echoing and modifying Sidney's *Apology*. Sidney (before Southwell) had pictured the poet as a tapestry-weaver: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers

poets have done”.<sup>27</sup> Southwell, however, does not portray the poet as an *alter deus* outdoing “Nature”, but as a humble “weaue[r]” of “course threds” – an abject poet-maker who is subject (not equal) to Christ and God. Southwell appropriates a Sidneian metaphor to refashion the role of the poet-maker.

We can also locate in the writings of Southwell a distinct Catholic discourse of literary “making” that exists independently from Sidney’s *Apology*. This is hinted at in the preface to *Saint Peters Complaint* when Southwell portrays Christ as an exemplary maker-poet: “Christ himselfe by making a Himne, the conclusion of his last Supper [...] gaue his Spouse a methode to immitate”. Southwell here is drawing upon the Eucharistic connotations of “making”. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, in the sixteenth century, to “receive one’s Maker” meant to receive the consecrated host in the Eucharist.<sup>28</sup> The Eucharistic undertones of “making” are elided by the Protestants, Sidney and Spenser, but are celebrated by the Jesuit priest, Southwell. This is evinced in Southwell’s poem, “Of the Blessed Sacrament of the Aulter” (printed 1616):

What god as auctour made he alter may,  
No change so harde as making all of nought:  
If Adam framed was of slymye claye,  
Bredd may to Christes most sacred flesh be wrought.  
He may do this that made with mighty hande  
Of water wyne, a snake of Moyses wande.<sup>29</sup>

Shaun Ross posits that God in these lines is an “auctour” of the world and the sacrament – that is both creator and writer. Southwell in the composition of this poem and in his administering of the Eucharist imitates God’s “originary creative act”.<sup>30</sup> I would add to Ross’s argument by pointing out that Southwell repeats “made”/ “making” three times in this stanza to pick up on God’s and the poet-priest’s role as a maker. Indeed, the verb “made” crops up earlier in the poem in relation to Christ: “He [Christ] made, he dressd, he gave, he was their meate”.<sup>31</sup> Christ (for Southwell) composes a poetic “Himne” at the “last Supper” and participates in the physical “making” of the meal; Christ is also the spiritual-physical embodiment of the Eucharist and mirrored within the poet-priest. The poet-priest for Southwell, therefore, is subject to God and Christ, but can simultaneously emulate their power in the “making” and administering of the Eucharist.

### “Making” in the manuscript writings of Constance Aston Fowler

How far-reaching were these theories of literary “making” put forward by Sidney, Spenser, Donne and Southwell? One way to address this question is to examine early modern manuscript cultures and specifically manuscript miscellany cultures. As Steven May points out, manuscript miscellanies represent a vast literary substratum and reveal much about the tastes and thinking of the early modern period.<sup>32</sup> Danielle Clarke has used the manuscript miscellany of the seventeenth-century Protestant woman, Lady Anne Southwell, to demonstrate that it was not just early modern male writers who engaged with theories of poetic “making”. Clarke elucidates her argument by examining a c. 1627 manuscript letter written by Anne Southwell to Cicely McWilliams, Lady Ridgeway, in which Southwell attempts to persuade her friend of the merits of “devine Poesye”. Southwell proposes that the biblical Psalms represent the height of poetic achievement:

see the kingly Prophett, that sweete singer of Israell, explicating the glorye of our god, his power in creating, his mercye in redeeming, his wisdome in preseruing; making these three, as it were Comma, Colon, & Period to euery stanzae. Who would not say, the musicall spheares did yeeld a cadencye to his songe, & in admiration crye out; Ô never enough to bee admired, devine Poesye.<sup>33</sup>

Clarke posits that Southwell's sentiment in this passage is conventional and echoes both Sidney's *Apology* and Donne's sermons on the Psalms.<sup>34</sup> But, as Clarke and Marie-Louise Coolahan point out, what is innovative here is Southwell's witty textual self-consciousness where the teleology of syntax is seen to illuminate the making of biblical verse: "making these three, as it were Comma, Colon, & Period". Southwell vividly portrays the Psalms' *enargeia* as physical punctuation marks and in so doing captures the conflation of the material with the divine.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, it is the lexis of "making" that Southwell explicitly draws upon to highlight the creative power within God and the Psalms: "making these three". Southwell (according to Clarke) goes on to posit in her manuscript miscellany that her own composition of verse is the extension of an encounter between herself and God: "And being dipt in heauens Selestiall Springes/ My penn shall portraitt Supernaturall thinges". In this quotation, Southwell's speaker exemplifies the poet as maker, as she expresses a desire to merge the abstract and the divine ("Supernaturall thinges"), with the earthly and the material ("My penn").<sup>36</sup>

But Anne Southwell's configuration of literary "making" (like Donne's 1622 Easter Monday sermon) contains a Protestant bias:

Poets, and Popleings, are æquippollent,  
both makers are, of Gods, of like descent,  
Poets makes blinde Gods, whoe with willowes beates them,  
Popleings' makes Hoasts of Gods, & euer eates them.  
But let them both, Poets & Popelings, passe  
whoe deales too much with eyther, is an Asse,  
Charon' conduct them, as they haue deuised.<sup>37</sup>

Secular/pagan "makers" (who "mak[e] blinde Gods") and Catholic "makers" who believe in transubstantiation ("Popleings' makes Hoasts of Gods, & euer eates them") are coupled together here: both are censured for polytheism. In Anne Southwell's list of books there is a copy of "Saint Peters Plaint in quarto", so in the above-cited lines she could be recalling and critiquing Robert Southwell's depiction of Eucharistic "making".<sup>38</sup> As Coolahan observes, Anne Southwell's "self-construction as a poet is overwhelmingly devotional and Protestant".<sup>39</sup> I would further Coolahan's statement by proposing that Anne Southwell's endorsement of poetic "making" is Protestant and anti-Catholic.

Manuscript evidence survives to suggest that the culture of early modern English poetic "making" was not consistently anti-Catholic. One seventeenth-century provincial Catholic coterie of men and women who were deeply engaged with the theories of literary "making" put forward by both Protestant and Catholic authors were the writers from the Aston-Thimelby circle of Staffordshire and Lincolnshire. Extant evidence (as outlined below) indicates that the Aston-Thimelby circle had access to the theories of poetic "making" propounded by Philip Sidney, Spenser, Donne and Robert Southwell. The manuscript writings of the Aston-Thimelby circle are an essential resource for constructing a more inclusive and expansive understanding of the tradition of early modern English literary "making".

Walter, Lord Aston (1584–1639) acted as ambassador to Spain under James I and Charles I. His family seat was at Tixall in Staffordshire. He was a committed Catholic but was excused from paying recusancy fines because of his friendship with the Stuart kings.<sup>40</sup> Lord Aston wrote verse and passed on his literary interests to three of his children: Herbert Aston (died 1688/9) and Gertrude Aston Thimelby (1617–1668) both composed poems, and Constance Aston Fowler was an avid collector and reader of poetry, exemplified by her surviving manuscript miscellany. In the period 1636–1638, Fowler copied for her miscellany poems by Catholic writers both within and outside of her coterie.<sup>41</sup> She transcribed verse by her relatives and friends who shared her faith, including Lord Aston, Herbert Aston, Katherine Thimelby, Lady Dorothy Shirley and William Pershall. Additionally, Fowler included in her miscellany at least two poems by the Catholic poet, William Habington, who probably did not belong to her circle of acquaintances.<sup>42</sup> Fowler also copied in her hand one devotional poem by the travelling Jesuit priest, William Smith (1594–1658), and Smith himself around 1639 scruvined thirteen religious poems into Fowler’s book, four of which are by Robert Southwell.<sup>43</sup>

Fowler not only transcribed poems by Catholic writers – she also included in her miscellany verse by Protestant authors. She copied, for instance, one widely circulating elegy by the English clergyman, Henry King, who became Bishop of Chichester in 1641.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in one poem by Herbert Aston (copied in Fowler’s hand), the poet-speaker cites and celebrates the writings of the Protestant writers, Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville:

our language sedney, whilst hee stella prayseth  
Her glory, and his fame together rayseth  
with CællicA most elegantly writt  
In æmulation of braue Seydney’s witt.

(50, ll. 39-42)

Here the poet-speaker alludes to Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* and Greville’s sonnet sequence, *Cællica*. What is more, the line, “In æmulation of braue Seydney’s witt”, brings to mind Sidney’s *Apology* in which he had stated “man’s wit may make Poesy”.<sup>45</sup> That the Astons were intimately acquainted with the literary outputs of the Protestant Sidneys is further evidenced in the nineteenth-century catalogue of the Tixall library. This catalogue records a manuscript copy of the Sidney Psalter, as well as a 1638 printed folio of Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*. It also lists writings by other early modern Protestants, including Donne’s *Poems* (1633) and a 1611 edition of the works of Spenser.<sup>46</sup> Although Sidney’s *Apology* does not appear in the Tixall library catalogue, the Astons would not have had to look far to obtain a copy as there was a resurgence of interest in it during the 1630s, as exhibited in works such as Henry Reynolds’s *Mythomystes* (1632) which had praised the “generous and ingenious Sidney” for his “prose-Apology in defence, of his fauorite, the excellent Art of Poesy”.<sup>47</sup>

That Constance Aston Fowler regarded literary creativity as “making” is revealed in a letter that she wrote to her brother, Herbert Aston, in c. 1636, when Herbert accompanied Lord Aston on a diplomatic mission to Madrid. This letter recounts an “occasion of making” when the writer Richard Fanshawe (Lord Aston’s secretary in Madrid) visited the Aston women at their home in Colton, Staffordshire, during a trip

to England.<sup>48</sup> This letter by Fowler encloses two poems that Fanshawe composed during that visit. Both are copied into Fowler's miscellany in her hand.<sup>49</sup> The first of these, "A dreame", compares Fowler and Gertrude Aston Thimelby to two swans on the River Trent in Staffordshire. The second describes how Aston Thimelby refuses to curl her hair until Herbert Aston returns home. Fowler's letter to Herbert Aston that accompanies these two poems repeats the verb "made"/"making" seven times within the space of seven sentences and this suggests that Fowler may have attached particular significance to this term:

Dear Brother,

That you may see how Mr Fanshaw has spent his time here, I have sent you these verses, which are of his **making** [...] The first were **made** upon this occasion: Wee wer all walking in the owld halle, and looking upon Trent, and I was speaking how you used to course your boy Dick about that meadow, and talking of many such things. But the next morning he came out with these verses, which I doe not think but you will like very well, for methinks they are very prity ones, if they had bin **made** of better subjectes. Wee **made** him beleeve that you should fight with him when he came into Spaine againe, for abusing your sisters so, in flattering of them so infinightly as he has don in these verses. But now to come to speeke of these other verses of his, which are **made** in particular to my sister Gatt. The occasion of **making** of them was this: We had bin one eavening at bowles, and when we caime in, my sister was opening her hayre with her fingers, and bid him tell you that she would not curle her hayer no otherwaies than it curled itselفة till she saw you againe. Upon which theame he **made** these other verses.<sup>50</sup>

For Fowler here "making" is emphatically connected to the poet, Fanshawe: "I have sent you these verses, which are of his [Fanshawe's] making". Fowler then initiates a shift from the singular "his making" to the plural "Wee made": "Wee [Fowler and Gertrude Aston Thimelby] made him [Fanshawe] beleeve that you [Herbert] should fight with him when he came into Spaine againe, for abusing your sisters so, in flattering of them so infinightly". In this sentence, "made" is not applied to the poet, Fanshawe, but to the inspirers of poetry, Fowler and Aston Thimelby, who partake in playful conversation and social interaction. By attaching the verb "made" both to the poet, Fanshawe, and to the muses, Fowler and Aston Thimelby, Fowler seems to be pointing to a subtle interplay between the creative act of writing poetry and the productive art of inspiring poetry. Indeed, Fowler and Aston Thimelby in this letter are not presented as passive and silent muses – they are defined by their dynamic words, thoughts and movements: "Wee wer all walking"; "I was speaking"; "for methinks"; "Wee made him beleeve"; "my sister was opening her hayre with her fingers, and bid him tell you". What Fowler is implying here is that Fanshawe's poetic outputs proceed from a stimulating domestic provincial environment where women – Fowler and Aston Thimelby – act as the instigators and facilitators of poetic "making". Of course, "making" verse and "making" conversation ("Wee made him beleeve") may have two different semantic functions; however, Fowler foregrounds a lexical crossing between literary artistry and sociality: conversation and social interaction leads to the creation of Fanshawe's verse and these poems in turn prompt an epistolary discourse between Fowler and Herbert Aston which is initiated by Fowler's letter.

The portrayal of poetic "making" as the product of communal mixed-sex domestic sociability finds further resonance in the phrase: "The occasion of making of them

was this". In this statement, Fowler fashions Fanshawe as an occasional poet whose verse commemorates a specific social occasion – in this instance, Aston Thimelby's curling of hair. But the "occasion of making" delineated here occurs because of the active participation of multiple agents: the poet, Fanshawe; the muses, Fowler and Aston Thimelby; and the letter writer and disseminator of verse, Fowler. Fowler contributes to this "occasion of making" by writing a letter which not only celebrates and circulates Fanshawe's occasional verse, but transmits – beyond the borders of Staffordshire and into Spain – Fowler's and Aston Thimelby's reputations as inspirers of poetic creativity.

Jenna Lay has urged us to read early modern English Catholic women's writing alongside canonical Renaissance Anglophone texts. This juxtapositioning (according to Lay) can highlight Catholic women writers' engagement with, and deviations from, hegemonic early modern English literary cultures.<sup>51</sup> I wish to test Lay's argument here by reading Fowler's letter alongside the April eclogue from Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* (the 1611 edition of which was held in the Tixall library). This might at first sight seem to be an incongruous juxtapositioning. However, we know that Fanshawe's "A dreame" (appended to Fowler's letter), was modelled on Spenser's *Prothalamion* (1596):

I saw two swans come proudly downe the streame  
Of Trent.

(Fanshawe, 59, l. 1-2)

I saw two Swannes of goodly hewe,  
Come softly swimming downe along the Lee.  
(Spenser, *Prothalamion*)<sup>52</sup>

In the *Prothalamion*, Spenser compared Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset to two swans on the Lea estuary; Fanshawe in "A dreame" pictures Fowler and Aston Thimelby as swans on the River Trent. Fowler may have recognized that Fanshawe's "A dreame" alluded to Spenser's *Prothalamion*, and she in her letter, I would suggest, furthers this connection by reworking Spenser's adumbration of "making"/*poesis* in the April eclogue. As we will recall, Spenser's narrator in the April eclogue describes an "occasion" in which the shepherd, Hobbinoll, recounts a song "made" by the poet, Colin, and in so doing conflates the roles of the poet with the "recorde[r]" of verse.<sup>53</sup> Similarly to Spenser's April eclogue, Fowler in her letter points to the multilayered nature of the "occasion of making": the process of poetic "making" – *poesis* – is not represented by her as a singular, exclusive act, determined by the poet, Fanshawe, but as a collective activity that includes the inspirers of poetry, the Aston sisters, and the disseminator of verse, Fowler herself.

Another reason why Fowler might have been drawn to Spenser's April eclogue is because of its portrayal of the classical female muses:

Muses trace,  
with their Violines.  
Bene they not Bay branches, which they doe beare,  
All for Elisa in her hand to weare?  
So sweetly they play,  
And sing all the way,  
That it a heaven is to heare.<sup>54</sup>

Although these muses are bestowed with heavenly voices, the principal inspirer for Colin's lay, Elisa, is a voiceless and stationary figure: "she [Elisa] sits upon the grassie greene,/(O seemely sight)".<sup>55</sup> Elisa is a silent "sight" beheld by her followers, but she is not given a voice. It is almost as if Colin is attempting to monitor Elisa's agency, hinted at in the phrase "mayden Queene", which refers to Elisa's virginal status and might also pun on "made", alluding to Elisa's poetic construction and control ("making") by Colin.<sup>56</sup> Yet, as Andrew Hadfield observes, the woodcut that accompanies the April eclogue delineates an alternative power dynamic. In this woodcut Elisa and her entourage of musical women take centre stage and dominate the landscape, whilst the diminutive piping shepherd (possibly Colin) is relegated to the left-hand corner: his music and poetry is drowned by the royal ensemble. According to Hadfield, this woodcut pictorially renders the antagonism and lack of communication between the queen's court and the nation which Elizabeth I's proposed marriage to the Duke of Alençon has caused.<sup>57</sup> This sense of political and social unease is furthered in the passage: "he taketh occasion [...] to recorde a songe, which the sayd Colin sometime made in honor of her Majestie".<sup>58</sup> As Hadfield observes, the time when this song for Elisa is "made" is left indeterminate and encourages the assumption that Colin has fallen out of favour (perhaps due to his religio-political views).<sup>59</sup> In contrast to the passive and disarticulate figure of Elisa, Fowler (as shown above) portrays herself and her sister, Aston Thimelby, as eloquent and participatory inspirers of verse who are defined by their thoughts, actions and conversation. In Fowler's letter, literary agency and "making" equally endows all of the male and female participants. Moreover, Fowler strategically downplays traces of socio-religious tension in her letter. As Helen Hackett points out, although (until the 1640s) the Astons seem to have been exempted from paying recusancy fines for their Catholicism, other English Catholic gentry families lived under constant threat of sequestration of their estates. Fowler's letter creates a textual fantasy of home as "safe, sure, innocent, unsullied and timeless, a place where memories of past shared happiness and hopes of future reunion converge". Fowler configures a nostalgic portrait of home for Herbert Aston ("the owld halle, and looking upon Trent, and I was speaking how you used to course your boy Dick about that meadow") to personify the unscathed sanctuary that awaits him on his return.<sup>60</sup> I would extend Hackett's argument by proposing that a key aspect of Fowler's vision of unscathed domesticity is her rendering of "making". The lexis of "making" moves in and around the different participants in the letter regardless of gender and confessional identity. Fanshawe is known to have been a Protestant, but he is integral to the "occasion of making", and so, too, are the Catholic Aston sisters.<sup>61</sup> Fowler's adumbration of poetic "making" embraces her Catholic siblings and their Protestant friend and feeds into her depiction of domestic safety that she so carefully constructs. Unlike the "occasion" that is "made" in Spenser's April eclogue, Fowler's "occasion of making" foregrounds cohesion rather than strife.

Of course, Fowler was not the only early modern writer to privilege social congruence over conflict. As Margaret Healy argues, the transcendence of factionalism is an important aspect of Shakespeare's writings. Hymen proclaims in *As You Like It*:

Then is there mirth in heaven  
When earthly things made even  
Atone together.

The love match celebrated here between male and female members of opposing families represents (for Healy) a political philosophy of social coalescence.<sup>62</sup> This ideology crops up again in *Love's Labour's Lost* when Biron states:

when love speaks, the voice of all the gods  
Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.  
Never durst poet touch a pen to write  
Until his ink were tempered with love's sighs.<sup>63</sup>

Healy posits that here harmonious “creation is sustained and civilized through the flow of love and the creation of art”.<sup>64</sup> Crucially, it is the language of “making” that is utilized in both these quotations from Hymen and Biron to advocate unity above discord: “earthly things made even/Atone together”; “Make heaven drowsy with the harmony”. The 1632 folio of Shakespeare’s plays is listed in the Tixall library, so Fowler may well have been inspired by him to create her own cohesive “occasion of making”.<sup>65</sup> As a Catholic woman writer, however, Fowler has been overlooked in the history of early modern English literary “making”. But reading Fowler’s letter alongside Spenser’s April eclogue, Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and *Love's Labour's Lost* showcases how Fowler – a provincial Catholic woman – may have been tactically exploiting the configurations of poetic “making” that were so central to the literary cultures of the Renaissance to suit her own domestic socio-political agenda.

If we turn to Fowler’s miscellany we find additional evidence of Fowler’s and her coterie’s creative reworking of the hegemonic early modern cultures of literary “making”. This is evinced in the encomium, “To My Honer’d sister G A”, which is copied in Fowler’s miscellany in her hand, and is attributed by her to Herbert Aston (“H A”):

neuer denye us that inspiring light,  
which we receau’d, with such a high delight  
from your pierian straines; but still inspire,  
Vs, with the heate of your poetique fire;  
For as the sun by uertue of his great  
Masculin luster and his quieckning heate;  
Of slime; and Mud, produceth liuing creatures;  
Diffring in nature; and of seuerall features;  
According to the mould from which they’r made,  
so your lines heate; and splendour; doth inuade  
Our dul, dead, muddy, minds; and doth create  
New Creatures; of what seem’d inanimate:  
And euen these lines though creatures of my minde,  
By your poetique fire they are refin’d;  
From there dull mould, you on them life bestow;  
Ther’s nothinge in them from my witt doth flow:  
By you they moue: all prayse to you is due  
For tis not I haue written this tis you.

(53, ll. 111-28)

What is innovative here is how the poet-speaker adapts the rhetoric of poetic “making” and “moving” from Sidney’s *Apology* and Donne’s *Anniversaries* and manipulates it to delineate the creativity of a Catholic woman poet-muse, Gertrude Aston Thimelby (“G A”). As Margaret Healy and Andrew Weiner have argued, Sidney in the *Apology* had emphatically used the verbs “make” and “move” for male poets and male readers: “Orpheus, Linus [...]

made pens deliverers of their knowledge”; “poets [...] delight to move men”.<sup>66</sup> “Move” for Sidney is loaded with significance as he implies that poets (like God) can become prime movers (*primum movens*) in their ability to transform their readers. Donne – who is cited explicitly in the opening lines of “To My Honer’d sister G A” (“As strong lin’d donne; the soul of poetry” [l. 5]) – had associated the terms “make” and “move” with a female muse, Elizabeth Drury, in the *Anniversaries*:

[Drury] Whose name refines course lines, and makes prose song.  
(“An Anatomie of the World”)

Thy soule (Deare Virgin) whose this tribute is,  
Mou’d from this mortall sphere to liuely blisse;  
And yet moues still.

(“The Harbinger to the Progress”)<sup>67</sup>

In “To My Honer’d sister G A”, these same verbs – “made” and “moue” (53, ll. 119, 127) – are aligned with a female poet, Aston Thimelby, who has the capacity to mix the masculine with the feminine. Aston Thimelby is allied with the home of the female muses, Pieria (l. 113). The poet-speaker then compares Aston Thimelby’s “poetique fire” (l. 114) to the “Masculin luster” (l. 116) of the sun, Phoebus, the God of poetry, who is also cited earlier in the poem: “First blest in hearing your [Aston Thimelby’s] phebean lines” (l. 35). This fusion of the female (“pierian straines”) with the male (“Masculin luster”) destabilizes the male dynamic of poetic “making” and “moving” in Sidney’s *Apology*, and problematizes the gender polarity of the *Anniversaries* in which Donne had set up a binary between the male poet-speaker (who composes verse) and the female muse (who inspires verse, but is eternally silent). For the poet-speaker in “To My Honer’d sister G A”, Aston Thimelby has the power to “create” (l. 121) and “moue” (l. 127) because of her gender-fluid status as Phoebean poet, Pierian muse and honoured sister.

We have noted that Fowler’s letter had portrayed Fanshawe as an occasional poet-maker rather than a sublime laureate artist. “To My Honer’d sister G A”, however, fashions Gertrude Aston Thimelby as a poet-maker in the transcendental sense:

Being taken all together you [Aston Thimelby] doe shrine;  
In human flesh; so true; and so deuine  
A diety, methinkes that it should mooue  
Vertue it selfe.

(53, ll. 79–82)

Aston Thimelby embodies “human flesh” (l. 80), yet the verb “shrine” (l. 79) intimates that she has saint-like qualities.<sup>68</sup> “Shrine” brings to mind Aston Thimelby’s sacred namesake, Gertrude the Great, who was not canonized until 1677 but referred to as “Saint Gertrude” by early modern Catholics such as Francis De Sales.<sup>69</sup> Aston Thimelby – like a saint or “diety” (l. 81) – is instilled with a life-bestowing poetic power: “By your poetique fire they [poetic lines] are refin’d;/From there dull mould, you on them life bestow” (ll. 124–25). The dominant strand of imagery in these lines stems from alchemy – the art of fire – transforming base, dull metals into gold. These alchemical allusions are strategic. As we will recall, in the *Apology*, Sidney had associated the poet-maker with an alchemist because of his ability to create golden worlds.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Donne in his *Anniversaries* endows his muse, Elizabeth Drury, with the gift

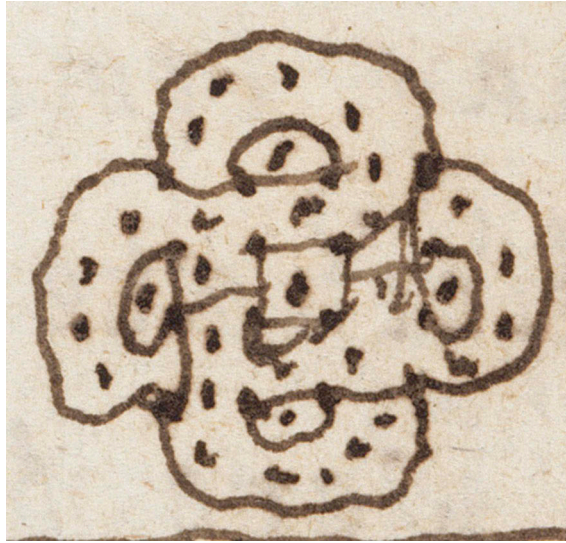
of initiating a “true religious Alchimy”, transfiguring Donne’s speaker’s literary output: “[Drury’s] name refines course lines, and makes prose song”.<sup>71</sup> In “To My Honer’d sister G A”, however, Aston Thimelby is not simply praised for being a muse (like Elizabeth Drury), but is exalted for being an alchemist-poet: Aston Thimelby is aligned with “poetique fire” (ll. 114, 124) and “heate” (l. 120) that can “refin[e]” (l. 124, chemically purify) “dul”/“dull” (ll. 121, 125) language and readers and transmute them into “New Creatures” (l. 122). Aston Thimelby, for the poet-speaker, becomes the poet-maker-chemist *par excellence* and she (like Sidney’s poet-maker in the *Apology*) ultimately enters into deific territory. This is striking because holy alchemical “making” was configured by Donne in anti-Catholic terms: “God can work in all metals, and transmute all metals: he can make [...] a Superstitious Christian, a sincere Christian; a Papist, a Protestant”.<sup>72</sup> “To My Honer’d sister G A” offers us an alternative early modern rendering of the divine alchemist-maker – one that is embodied by a Catholic woman writer.

As has been noted, in his Easter Monday sermon of 1622, Donne had presented his divine maker, God, as a pro-Protestant figure open to converting the “right handed Atheism in the stubborn Papist”.<sup>73</sup> The manuscript outputs of the Astons, however, richly demonstrate that early modern English Catholics did not have to abandon their faith to partake in divine-inspired “making”. This is explicated by the cipher that ends “To My Honer’d sister G A”. This cipher is drawn in Fowler’s hand and configures a knot that weaves together Herbert Aston’s initials (H A) with the word “goD”.<sup>74</sup> “To My Honer’d sister G A” is one of seven poems in Fowler’s miscellany that ends with this cipher (see [Figure 1](#)).<sup>75</sup> As Jenijoy La Belle points out, the lower-case “g” and the upper-case “D” in this cipher are carefully shaped by Fowler so that they can be read “interchangeably depending upon which way the cipher is turned”, and thus the word “goD” can be found four times in this cipher of five letters. La Belle goes on to posit that Fowler’s merging of Herbert Aston’s initials with “goD” shows the “worshipful respect” that Fowler had for her brother and his poetic compositions.<sup>76</sup> However, I would argue that Fowler’s cipher for her brother’s verse is a visual rendering of the role of the poetic “maker”, who, as Sidney reminds us, has the capacity to resemble his “heavenly Maker”, God.<sup>77</sup> This supposition is supported by the fact that in one of Fowler’s letters (dated 17 August 1636), she overtly describes Herbert Aston’s poetic compositions as “making”:

I haue written to you [Herbert] I know not how often and beged of you most pittifully that you would send mee some uerses of your owne making and yet you neuer would when you know I Loue them more then can bee expressed.<sup>78</sup>

Read within the context of this letter, it seems that Fowler’s cipher for her brother offers us a unique pictorial reification of Herbert Aston’s poetic “makeing”. Aston, for Fowler, through the composition of his verse, can reflect his divine Maker, “goD”, just like the muse, poet and “shrine[d]” (53, l. 79) figure, Gertrude Aston Thimelby, in “To My Honer’d sister G A”. Both Fowler’s cipher for Herbert Aston and his poem, “To My Honer’d sister G A”, point to the kinship between poetic “makeing” and the potentially “deuine” (53, l. 80) power of the poet.

Fowler’s knot cipher for her brother’s verse brings to the fore Herbert Aston’s role as a poet-maker and simultaneously typifies Fowler’s own artistic handiwork as a spiritual-material scribe. As Wendy Wall observes, early modern writing manuals regarded the drawing of knots as a critical stepping-stone for learning how to formulate letters.<sup>79</sup>



**Figure 1.** Constance Aston Fowler's cipher for Herbert Aston's poems. Huntington Library, MS HM 904, f. 25r (enlarged detail). Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino.

This is evinced in William Comley's *A New Alphabet of the Capitall Romane Knotted Letters, fit and ready to set any manner of hand to; with Knots vnto the same; for the vnskilfull to practise by* (1622). The title of Comley's writing manual links knotting to the creation of "Romane" letters – the Italian humanist script that is upright and rounded. By drawing the perfect knot that includes the letters "H A" and "goD", Fowler is highlighting the fact that she (as an amateur scribe) has practised the art of writing Roman majuscule and minuscule letters, and, in so doing, she is fashioning herself as the ideal non-professional scrivener, ready to copy out the poetic outputs of her literary community: "send mee some uerses of your owne making".

What is more, by repeatedly replicating the word "goD" in her hand, Fowler herself is endeavouring to reach the divine. Evidence for this can found in the poem, "A true loues knott that was giuen As a fancy for a newyears gift", which is written in Fowler's miscellany in her hand and attributed by her to "Mr H T".<sup>80</sup> In this poem, the speaker aligns the drawing of a knot to the verb "make"/"made" on two occasions:

make mee thy fancy and if I proue not  
 A true loues knott  
 That neuer faides, then cast mee of a gaine.  
 (60, ll. 1-3)

Next looke it bee not made to loose, too fast  
 for nether last.  
 (60, ll. 19-20)

As La Belle points out, the poet-speaker here is ruminating on the creation of an ideal "true loues knott" – a symbol of emotional fidelity that avoids the extremes of looseness (and thus can slip) and fastness (which can break when pulled).<sup>81</sup> But the verb "make"/"made" takes on a potentially divine resonance once read through the lens of these lines:

it must bee drawne by hand deuine  
 to be like mine  
 For t'were in uayne for mortalls to indeauour  
 what last's for euer  
 And that's a true loues knott.

(60, ll. 13–17)

In this construction a flawless knot can only be tied by a “hand deuine” (l. 13). These lines may have been a source of inspiration for Fowler’s knot cipher. By attempting to draw the perfect knot and balancing it with the word, “goD”, Fowler is seeking to emulate the “hand deuine”.

Helen Hackett, Paul Trolander and Zeynep Tenger have categorized Fowler as a “literary agent” and “voucher” who compiles, copies and circulates poems.<sup>82</sup> But the words “literary agent” and “voucher” are never used by Fowler and her coterie. As we have seen, the discourse that the Astons are engaged with is “making”. Fowler deserves to be viewed as a “maker” in the sense that she is a divinely inspired scrivener of verse. Whereas Donne had condemned the “right handed Atheism in the stubborn Papist”, Fowler uses her hand and handiwork to reify “goD” as a pro-Catholic, knitting together a community of Catholic “makers” – Herbert Aston, Gertrude Aston Thimelby and Fowler – who are tied to each other via blood, faith and *poesis*.

### Catholic “making”

In the religious poems in Fowler’s miscellany we find a distinctly Catholic aesthetic of “making” that does not emanate from Sidneian or Spenserian *poesis*, but takes as its primary source of inspiration the theories of devotional “making” advanced by the Jesuit, Robert Southwell. As Cedric Brown points out, thirteen out of the sixty-five poems in Fowler’s book are written in the hand of the Jesuit priest, William Smith.<sup>83</sup> Smith’s transcriptions were carried out in around 1639 – after Fowler had made her transcriptions.<sup>84</sup> All thirteen of Smith’s additions are explicitly devotional. Helen Hackett posits that Fowler may have solicited Smith to enhance the devotional content of her miscellany.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, before Smith had inserted his transcriptions, Fowler had revealed a keen interest in religious verse, as she copied two devotional poems: the first, “On the Passion of our Lord and sauior Iesus”, is the longest poem in Fowler’s miscellany, running to 274 lines.<sup>86</sup> The second, “O Lord direct my hart, direct my soule”, is attributed by Fowler to Master William Smith (“M. W. S”) – the first twenty-one lines of this poem are written in an unidentified hand, while the remaining eighty-three lines are copied in Fowler’s hand.<sup>87</sup> Fowler’s transcription of Smith’s poem, “O Lord direct my hart, direct my soule”, suggests that she may have known Smith and his poems prior to his making the additions to her miscellany. Moreover, her copying of part of Smith’s poem indicates that she was certainly interested in his poetic output.

In one of the poems written in Smith’s hand, “A certaine king married A sonne”, the verb “make” occurs three times in the last twelve lines:

Now let us all make garments newe  
 Against that wedding Day  
 that we may sitt with Christ Iesu  
 In garments that be gay  
 [...]

for many Called Are indeede  
 but few Are Chosen As wee reade  
 therefore thereto lets make good speede  
 And make noe long Delay.

(31, ll. 85–88, 93–96)

Here the poet (which may be Smith himself) provides a moral lesson on what the parable of the marriage feast (from Matthew, 22:1–14) teaches its readers/listeners. The three-fold repetition of “make” brings to mind Southwell’s preface to *Saint Peters Complaint* in which Southwell had used the verbs “making” and “weau[ing]” to incite his readers to make devotional verse.<sup>88</sup> Southwell’s use of “making” and “weau[ing]” seems to have appealed to the poet-speaker of “A certaine king” in Fowler’s miscellany: “Now let us all make garments newe” (31, l. 85). Here the poet-speaker aligns the verb “make” to the creation of textiles – the making of garments. “Garments” reminds us of the annotations of the Gospel of St Matthew from *The New Testament of Iesvs Christ* (1582, translated by the Catholic priest, Gregory Martin), where the material “garment” is associated both with earthly good works (“the garment of charitie and good workes”) and Christ’s mystical miracle working (“Not only Christes wordes, but his garment [...] might doe and did miracles”).<sup>89</sup> The poet-speaker of “A certaine king” is instructing his readers to partake in spiritual-material garment “making”: both the execution of Christian good works and the reading of the New Testament – “As wee reade” (31, l. 94). Although the verb “to make” is used in “A certaine king”, the poet-speaker, crucially, does not wish to fashion himself as an *alter deus*. Indeed, the individual identity of the poet is not foregrounded in “A certaine king”, but, rather, the poet-speaker wishes to draw attention to a collective religious identity that participates in communal devotional making: “Now let us all make” (31, l. 85). The “us” cited here is not a universal “us” appealing to all Christians, but is aimed specifically at Fowler and her Catholic coterie.

William Smith is not the sole scrivener of religious verse in Fowler’s book – Fowler herself copies the anonymous female-voiced devotional poem, “On the Passion of our Lord and sauior Iesus”. Although “On the Passion” is written in Fowler’s hand, Helen Hackett and Femke Molekamp argue that it was probably composed by Fowler’s sister, the poet Gertrude Aston Thimelby.<sup>90</sup> Aston Thimelby’s identity is revealed in “On the Passion” in the following lines:

My often curlinge weau’d his [Christ’s] crown of Thorns.  
 (4, l. 186)

My will and understandinge I resigne  
 vnto the crosse: and to his [Christ’s] crowne of Thorns  
 And peirced head bequeath all that Adorns  
 My useles haire.

(4, ll. 266–69)

Here we find a reference to the poet-speaker’s “curlinge” of hair, which is reminiscent of Fowler’s c. 1636 letter in which Aston Thimelby is associated with hair curling. Of course, Fowler’s letter had pointed to a social, secular “occasion of making” – Aston Thimelby’s curling of hair and its inspiration for Fanshawe’s verse.<sup>91</sup> But in the above-cited lines from “On the Passion”, the curling of hair is mentioned within a devout

context where the poet-speaker uses her earthly physical feminine identity to highlight her culpability in Christ's crucifixion.

What is intriguing about this allusion to hair curling in "On the Passion" is the poet-speaker's choice of the verb "weau'd" (4, l. 186). "Weau'd" harks back to Southwell's weaving metaphor from the preface to *Saint Peters Complaint* in which Southwell had instructed poets "to weau[e] a new webbe" of devotional verse.<sup>92</sup> The poet-speaker of "On the Passion" places Southwell's weaving metaphor specifically within a feminine context – the curling of hair. The poet-speaker in "On the Passion" uses her abject feminine physicality as a mechanism to weave her own body with the body of the crucified Christ.

It is within a penitential, feminine context that the verb "make" is recruited by the poet-speaker in the "On the Passion": "For his [Christ's] loue contrition shall force roome/within my soule, and make my heart his tombe" (4, ll. 273–74). These lines recall the tomb of Christ by which he first appears to the penitent female figure, Mary Magdalene, after his death.<sup>93</sup> The juxtaposition of "make" and "tombe" here by the poet-speaker brings to mind Southwell's *Marie Magdalens Fvneral Teares* (1591), which the Aston women could have read via their connection to the Jesuit priest, Smith. As Southwell reminds us, Mary Magdalene chooses to remain at Christ's tomb after his death, declaring:

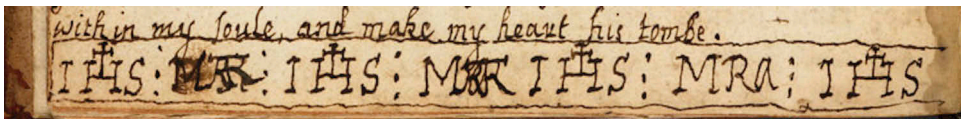
I may at the least bee buried by the tombe of my Lord, and take my iron sleepe neere this couche of stone, which his presence hath made the place of sweetest repose.<sup>94</sup>

Southwell applies the verb "made" to Christ's sacrosanct physical and spiritual presence: "his presence hath made". Southwell then goes on to utilize the verb "made" to highlight Christ's divine proselytizing power, as his words after his resurrection transform Mary Magdalene "as if she had beene wholly new made":

she heard thee [Christ] call her in thy woonted [sic] maner, and with thy usuall voyce, her onely name issuing fro[m] thy mouth, wrought so strange an alteration in her, as if she had beene wholly new made.<sup>95</sup>

Read within this context, the poet-speaker's juxtaposing of "make" and "tombe" (4, l. 274) in "On the Passion" seems to be strategic. The poet-speaker in "On the Passion" desires to emulate the female penitent, Mary Magdalene, and experience an inner resurrection of Christ's "tombe" – the place of Christ's earthly reappearance. Christ and the power of a Magdalene-inspired "contrition" have the potential to "make" a spiritual-material "tombe" in the speaker's "heart" (4, ll. 273–74) in "On the Passion".

The scribe, Fowler, extends this lexis of "mak[ing]" (4, l. 274) and "weau[ing]" (4, l. 186) found in "On the Passion" by closing the poem with an ornate rectangular border (Figure 2) reminiscent of the "bands" that were being embroidered on band samplers by seventeenth-



**Figure 2.** Constance Aston Fowler's border at the end of "On the Passion of our Lord and sauior Iesus". Huntington Library, MS HM 904, f. 12v. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino.

century women.<sup>96</sup> As Susan Frye points out, band samplers first started to appear in England during the 1630s (the same time as Fowler's creation of her miscellany) and featured letters, stitches and patterns that demonstrated a young woman's proficiency in domestic needlework.<sup>97</sup> Band samplers were usually vertical in shape, but were made up of a series of individual "bands" that were designed to be read and viewed horizontally.<sup>98</sup> What is striking about Fowler's border/textual band at the end of "On the Passion" is its use of devotional monograms. Fowler fills her border with a series of letters, including the four-fold repetition of "I H S" (with a crucifix above the "H"). "I H S" (with the surmounted crucifix) is the monogram for *Iesus Christus* and often featured on the title-pages of early modern printed Jesuit texts.<sup>99</sup> The 1609 edition of *The Life of the Blessed Virgin, Sainct Catharine of Siena*, translated by the English Catholic priest, John Fenn, and owned by Fowler's niece, Gertrude Aston (1637–1682), included on its title-page the *Iesus Christus* monogram (with the crucifix above the "H").<sup>100</sup> What is more, Fowler on her embellished border, couples the letters "I H S" with "M R a". According to Jenijoy La Belle, "M R a" stands for the Virgin Mary (*Maria Regina Angelorum* – Mary Queen of Angels).<sup>101</sup> By weaving together the letters "I H S" and "M R a", Fowler is alluding to the poem, "On the Passion", which had emphasized the Virgin Mary's role during Christ's Passion:

His poore Afflicted Mother hee had left  
Widow'd of all her comforts, and bereft  
Of her deere sonne; O see her sadly weepe  
prepard with teares his funerall to keepe.

(4, ll. 57–60)

The founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola, had encouraged the application of the senses during religious meditation, and the poet-speaker of "On the Passion" here is instructing her readers to actively "see" (4, l. 59) the weeping Virgin Mary.<sup>102</sup> As Jenna Lay observes, it is this crucial moment in "On the Passion" – the focus on the Virgin Mary – that ultimately leads to the poet-speaker's own heightened seeing: "Now I behold, and see my selfe most cleere" (4, l. 179).<sup>103</sup> The scribe, Fowler, too, beholds the Virgin Mary and Christ by emphatically etching their monograms on to her border. This border exhibits how Fowler was manipulating the visual and material aspects of her scribal practice to engage in a devotional "weau[ing]" (4, l. 186) that was encouraged by both the poet-speaker of "On the Passion" and the priests, Robert Southwell and William Smith. What is inventive about Fowler's devout weaving is that she appears to be using a specifically feminine genre – the textual band sampler – as a means to weave her own hand, sight and soul with Christ and the Virgin Mary. Fowler's border/textual band at the end of "On the Passion" is a striking example of Fowler's own "making" praxis – her interest in merging the material, physical and visual with the sacred ("I H S", "M R a"). S. K. Heninger posits that the seminal Anglophone texts that formed the basis for literary "making" in early modern England were Sidney's *Apology* and Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*.<sup>104</sup> As we have seen, both of these texts appear to manipulate the concept of "making" to configure a Protestant poetic. "On the Passion", however, draws upon a different culture of "making" that stems from the Catholic poetics of Robert Southwell's *Saint Peters Complaint* and *Marie Magdalens Fvneral Teares*. What we find in "On the Passion" is a pro-Catholic and feminized spiritual-material aesthetic of "making" that is not governed by a Sidneian or Spenserian *poesis*.

## Conclusion

I would now like to return to the writer who is described by Margaret Healy as the “rhetorician of unification” – Shakespeare.<sup>105</sup> As we will recall, in *As You Like It* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the language of “making” is adopted to celebrate harmony over discord: “mirth in heaven/When earthly things made even/Atone together”; “when love speaks, the voice of all the gods/Make heaven drowsy with the harmony”.<sup>106</sup> “Made”/“make” is connected to “heaven” here, and this celestial space is left implicitly open to all. According to Healy, in these extracts there is a vision of social cohesion that surpasses religious divides.<sup>107</sup> Healy elucidates this supposition by reading these quotations alongside the philosophies of the seventeenth-century tolerationist, John Etherington, who proclaimed in 1610:

all the stones of this building are his [Christ’s] brethren, reborne and made a new, not in shew, but in very trueth, not for time, but for euer [...] this vniuersall Church of Christ, consisting of stones of life.<sup>108</sup>

Etherington’s “vniuersal Church” is “made a new” and open to all Christians – similar to Shakespeare’s adumbration of a division-free heaven.

But even a rhetorician of unification such as Shakespeare at times expresses a startling ambivalence in the depiction of Catholic monastic women. This is exhibited in the poem, *A Lover’s Complaint*, which closes Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* (1609). Here an unnamed nun is represented as being physically and spiritually suppressed – she must fly from her “caged cloister” before she can experience true religious love with the mysterious “phoenix”: “And now she would the caged cloister fly./Religious love put out religion’s eye”.<sup>109</sup> As Margaret Healy explains, one of the available meanings of these lines is that the nun “has broken free from the confines of her convent (the confining bricks and mortar of Roman Catholicism) [...] established religion’s ‘eye’/I (egotism) has been displaced and replaced by passionate ‘phoenix’ love”. The “phoenix” that liberates the nun in *A Lover’s Complaint* (according to Healy) may be a personification of the alchemical opus, the philosophers’ stone – Christ.<sup>110</sup> In Fowler’s miscellany, however, Catholic women are not configured as repressed figures – their Catholic faith does not inhibit their ability to reach their divine makers, God and Christ. “To My Honer’d sister G A” portrays the Catholic woman writer, Gertrude Aston Thimelby (who became a nun in 1655), as the consummate transcendental poet-maker-chemist.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, in the poem, “On the Passion of our Lord and sauior Iesus”, the female speaker and the scribe (Fowler) use their devout Catholicism to reify Christ and the Virgin Mary via a feminized form of spiritual-material “making”. If we are to paint a more accurate and historically nuanced picture of the history of English poetic “making”, we must reintegrate into that culture the neglected outputs of early modern Catholic female and male authors. The writers from the Aston-Thimelby circle offer crucial evidence for the reconstruction of the cultures of “making” in early modern England.

## Notes

1. Healy and Healy, “Introduction”, 4.
2. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*, 288-90.
3. Sidney, *Apology*, 84, 86.

4. Heninger, *Sidney and Spenser: The Poet as Maker*, 285-86; Sidney, *Apology*, 84.
5. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535*, in Pelikan et al., eds., *Luther's Works*, volume 26, 226-36.
6. Shell, "What is a Catholic Poem?"; *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination*; Sweeney, *Robert Southwell*; Kuchar, "Alchemy, Repentance and Recusant Allegory"; Lay, *Beyond the Cloister*.
7. Aldrich-Watson, ed., *The Verse Miscellany of Constance Aston Fowler*. All quotations of poems from Fowler's manuscript miscellany are taken from Aldrich-Watson's edition, preceded by the poem number and line reference.
8. Healy and Healy, "Introduction", 4.
9. Palsgrave, *Lesclarcissement*, sig. BBB1r.
10. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*, 288, 296, 315.
11. Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*, in Oram et al., eds., *Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, 70.
12. *Ibid.*, 77.
13. Owens, *Enabling Engagements*, 57.
14. Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, 176-87.
15. Spenser, *Calender*, 105.
16. McLane, "Spenser's Political and Religious Position", 326-27.
17. Spenser, *Calender*, 213, ll. 1-4.
18. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*, 311-15.
19. McLane, "Spenser's Political and Religious Position", 332; Parmenter, "Spenser Twelve Aeglogues", 194-96.
20. Sidney, *Apology*, 85.
21. Donne, "Sermon No. 1: Preached upon the Penitential Psalms", in Potter and Simpson, eds., *Sermons*, volume 6, 41.
22. Donne, "Sermon No. 3: Preached at the Spittle", in Potter and Simpson, eds., *Sermons*, volume 4, 110, 131.
23. Healy and Healy, "Introduction", 4.
24. Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination*, 67. See also Sweeney, *Robert Southwell*, 235-43.
25. Southwell, *Saint Peters Complaint*, sig. A2r.
26. *Ibid.*, sig. A2v.
27. Sidney, *Apology*, 85.
28. "Maker, n. 2b", in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 6 May 2018).
29. Southwell, "Of the Blessed Sacrament of the Aulter", in McDonald and Brown, eds., *The Poems of Robert Southwell, S. J.*, 28, ll. 85-90.
30. Ross, "Robert Southwell", 78.
31. Southwell, "Of the Blessed Sacrament", 26, l. 12.
32. May, "Introduction", vii.
33. Clarke, "Gender, Material Culture", 112-21; Klene, ed., *The Southwell-Sibthorpe Commonplace Book*, 5.
34. Clarke, "Gender, Material Culture", 116, 118.
35. Clarke, "Gender, Material Culture", 116, 118; Clarke and Coolahan, "Gender, Reception and Form", 148.
36. Clarke, "Gender, Material Culture", 119; A. Southwell, "The ffirst Commandement", in Klene, ed., *The Southwell-Sibthorpe Commonplace Book*, 45, ll. 5-6.
37. A. Southwell, "An Elegie written by the Lady A: S: to the Countesse of London Derrye", in Klene, ed., *The Southwell-Sibthorpe Commonplace Book*, 26, ll. 77-83.
38. "A List of my Bookes", in Klene, ed., *The Southwell-Sibthorpe Commonplace Book*, 101.
39. Coolahan, *Women, Writing and Language in Early Modern Ireland*, 183.
40. Loomie, "Aston, Walter".
41. These dates for Fowler's transcriptions are taken from Hackett, "Unlocking the Mysteries", 107-11.

42. See Hackett, "Women and Catholic Manuscript Networks", 1116.
43. The dating of Smith's transcriptions are outlined by Hackett, "Unlocking the Mysteries", 109.
44. Hobbs, "King, Henry".
45. Sidney, *Apology*, 104.
46. *The Tixall Library*, 49, 50, 18, 51, lots 598, 599, 206, 610.
47. Reynolds, *Mythomystes*, 8.
48. The original manuscript copy of this letter is now apparently lost. It was transcribed and printed in the nineteenth century by the Astons' descendent, Arthur Clifford, ed., *Tixall Poetry*, 215.
49. Huntington Library, San Marino, MS HM 904, ff. 185v-186r; 187r-187v.
50. Clifford, ed., *Tixall Poetry*, 215, my emphasis.
51. Lay, *Beyond the Cloister*.
52. Spenser, *Prothalamion*, in Oram et al., eds., *Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, 763, ll. 37-38.
53. Spenser, *Calender*, 70.
54. *Ibid.*, 74, ll. 102-08.
55. *Ibid.*, 73, ll. 55-56.
56. *Ibid.*, 73, l. 57.
57. *Ibid.*, 70; Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, 177, 184.
58. Spenser, *Calender*, 70.
59. Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, 184.
60. Hackett, "Sisterhood and Female Friendship", 138. Hackett here cites Smith, "The Persecution of Staffordshire Roman Catholic Recusants".
61. For Fanshawe's Protestantism see Davidson, "Fanshawe, Sir Richard" and Lockey, *Early Modern Catholics, Royalists and Cosmopolitans*, 261.
62. Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, 198; Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in Wells and Taylor, eds., *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, V. iv. 106-08.
63. Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, in Wells and Taylor, eds., *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, IV. iii. 320-23.
64. Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, 199.
65. *The Tixall Library*, 49, lot 592 .
66. Healy, "Poetic 'Making'", 178-79; Weiner, "Moving and Teaching"; Sidney, *Apology*, 82, 87.
67. Donne, "An Anatomie of the World", 17, l. 446; "The Harbinger to the Progress", 23, ll. 3-5. Citations from Stringer et al., eds., *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 6*.
68. "Shrine, v. 1b", in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 6 May 2018).
69. De Sales, *Delicious Entertainments of the Soule*, trans. Deacon, 241.
70. Sidney, *Apology*, 85.
71. Donne, "An Anatomie of the World", 11, 17, ll. 182, 446.
72. Donne, "Sermon No. 3: Preached at the Spittle", 110.
73. *Ibid.*, 131.
74. MS HM 904, f. 158r.
75. *Ibid.*, ff. 25r, 26r, 47r, 48v, 152v, 158r, 188v.
76. La Belle, "A True Love's Knot", 19.
77. Sidney, *Apology*, 86.
78. British Library, London, MS Additional 36452, f. 22v.
79. Wall, *Recipes for Thought*, 143.
80. MS HM 904, ff. 186r-187r.
81. La Belle, "A True Love's Knot", 26.
82. Hackett, "Women and Catholic Manuscript Networks", 1094; Trolander and Tenger, *Sociable Criticism*, 33-35.
83. Brown, "William Smith", 118-19.
84. See Hackett, "Unlocking the Mysteries", 104.

85. Ibid., 111.
86. MS HM 904, ff. 8r-12v.
87. Ibid., ff. 13v-15v; see also Hackett, “Unlocking the Mysteries”, 102.
88. Southwell, *Saint Peters Complaint*, sigs. A2r-A2v.
89. *The New Testament of Iesvs Christ*, 64, 24; McCoog, “Martin, Gregory”.
90. Hackett, “Sisterhood and Female Friendship”, 137; Molekamp, *Women and the Bible*, 197-98.
91. Clifford, ed., *Tixall Poetry*, 215.
92. Southwell, *Saint Peters Complaint*, sig. A2v.
93. *The New Jerusalem Bible*, John 20:11-18.
94. Southwell, *Marie Magdalens Fvneral Teares*, f. 17r.
95. Ibid., f. 57v.
96. MS HM 904, f. 12v.
97. Frye, *Pens and Needles*, 126.
98. King and Levey, *The Victoria and Albert Museum’s Textile Collection*, 18.
99. See Havens, “Lay Catholic Book Ownership”, 247.
100. Raymond of Capua, *The Life of the Blessed Virgin, Sainct Catharine of Siena*, trans. Fenn, title-page. For Gertrude Aston’s ownership of this text, see Bowden, “Building Libraries in Exile”, 361.
101. La Belle, “The Huntington Aston Manuscript”, 566.
102. St. Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Mottola, 95.
103. Lay, *Beyond the Cloister*, 168.
104. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*, 288-90, 296.
105. Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, 198.
106. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, V. iv. 106-08; *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, IV. iii. 320-21.
107. Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, 198-99.
108. Etherington, *A Description of the Chvrch of Christ*, 2; Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, 204.
109. Shakespeare, *A Lover’s Complaint*, in Wells and Taylor, eds., *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 771, 773, ll. 93, 249-50.
110. Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, 200, 142-49. For further exposition on Shakespeare’s representation of Catholic monastic women, see Lay’s discussion of *Measure for Measure* in *Beyond the Cloister*, 48-56. Lay does not discuss *A Lover’s Complaint*.
111. Long, “Thimelby [née Aston], Gertrude”.

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