A HANDWRITTEN PRAYER IN THE FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY’S COPY
OF RICHARD HYRDE’S INSTRUCTION OF A CHRISTEN WOMAN*

AMONG the holdings in the Folger Shakespeare Library is a copy of the first printed edition of *A very frutefull and pleasant boke called the Instruction of a Christen Woman*, translated by Richard Hyrde from Juan Luis Vives’ *De institutione feminae Christianae*. On page B4v of this book is a handwritten note including a prayer by a reader with the date 1637. The annotation in this particular copy of Hyrde’s book is mentioned in A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave’s *Short-Title Catalogue (STC)* and the online *Hamnet: Folger Library Catalogue*, and is accessible through *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*, but this prayer has gone relatively unnoticed. In what follows, I provide a transcription of the prayer as well as a discussion relating the note to paleographical and source contexts.

The prayer reads (see Image 1 [not provided in manuscript, due to permission rights]):

12° September 1637.

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* Forthcoming in *Notes and Queries* (projected 2015).
4 *EEBO* also contains a record and images for the copy in the British Library (STC 24856).
5 Lineation is retained and punctuation as well as capitalization follow the original.
This Booke was made six hundred and thirteene yeares agoe.

O Lord. a thousand yeares are in thy sight but as yesterday. and a day as a thousand yeares
Our tyme passeth away like a shadow. and wee bring our dayes to an end like a tale that is told.

Lord teach us to number our dayes that wee may apply our hearts unto Wisedome.

Amen

It is not surprising to find a seventeenth-century note in a copy of *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, considering the popularity and influence of the treatise throughout the Tudor period. Vives first composed *De institutione feminae Christianae* and dedicated it to Catherine of Aragon in 1523, and soon afterward the text was translated into a number of European vernaculars—among them Hyrde’s English version, printed in London in 1529. This translation was continuously printed throughout the sixteenth century, and the book continued to be read

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6 The 1 in 1637 appears to have been written originally as i (with serif to the right), but a descending tale has been added, giving it the appearance of a j.
7 Originally written as *six*, struck through with three lines, and one is written above it.
8 The letter *a* is smudged.
9 Here the text runs into the binding seem and is obscured; I have offered this conjectural reading based on the source (see below).
throughout the early modern period. In noting the date and time from the printing of the book, the author was most likely responding to the date that Hyrde gives as the end of his preface, just above the handwritten passage as ‘the yere of our lorde. M. D. and .xxiii’, referring to the original date of Vives’ composition.

The inscription was written in dark brown ink, in a mixed secretary hand, presenting two aspects—one more formal for the note about the date, and another more cursive for the prayer. In the hand’s adherence to early seventeenth-century styles, letter-forms are comparable to those in a series of contemporary, popular writing manuals by Martin Billingsley: The Pen’s Excellencie or The Secretaries’ Delighte (1618; STC 3062); A Newe Booke of Copies containing divers sortes of sundry hands (1620; STC 3363.8); and A Coppie Booke Containing varietie of Examples of all the most Curious Hands written (1637; STC 3061). In comparison to such styles, several distinctive features stand out: a lack of abbreviations; a highly decorated capital S for September; embellished capital O at the start of lines 4 and 6; four different forms of s (besides the one in September); flourishing descenders on the numeral I (in the date) and the capital L in the last Lord (line 9); and a flourish on the point of capital A in Amen. The letter s presents a particularly significant instance of how this hand uses a variety of forms current in the period, including cursive 8-shaped s (as in thousand, sight, and the first s in passetth, lines 4, 5, and 6), short s (as in was, yeares, and the second s in passetth, lines 2, 3, and 6), long s with pointed head and exaggerated descender (as in yesterday and shadow, lines 4 and 5)—with cursive and long forms used interchangeably in initial and medial positions—as well as a 6-shaped s used only

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12 For Hyrde’s translation and subsequent printings, see STC 24856-63; and Travitsky, ‘Reprinting Tudor History’.
terminally and attached to preceding e (as in yeares and dayes, lines 4, 5, and 7). This note thus provides a significant witness of a dated secretary script during the transitional period of the early seventeenth century.

In addition to the handwritten note, the Folger copy of Instruction of a Christen Woman also contains signatures by a certain man named Thomas on A2r, D2r, and G3v. Thomas’s signature does not appear to be in the same hand as the note and prayer, since his letterforms are not precisely comparable with either of the scripts represented on B4v. Yet, in accounting for varying styles of writing under different circumstances—quickly scrawling one’s name rather than carefully inscribing a prayer—the issue remains inconclusive.

Much of the inscribed prayer echoes Psalm 89 (90),14 corresponding to Miles Coverdale’s 1535 Bible (STC 2063), in which the psalm is given the heading ‘A prayer of Moses the man of God’.15 Every line of the inscribed prayer, in fact, is adapted from verses in Coverdale’s Bible (verbal parallels are indicated in italics):16

Psalm 89:4: For a thousande yeares in thy sight are but as yesterdaye that is past


16 Other than orthographical variants, these same passages remain unrevised in the 1539 Great Bible (STC 2068). Modern Protestant chapter numbering for the Psalms did not change until the publication of the Geneva Bible (1560), followed by the King James Bible (1610). I cite chapters and verse numbers as in Coverdale’s Bible.
2 Peter 3:8: one daye is with the LORDE as a thousande yeare

Psalm 143:4: his tyme passeth awaye like a shadowe (cf. Wisdom 2:5)

Psalm 89:9: we brynge or yeares to an ende, as it were a tayle that is tolde

Psalm 89:12: O teach us to nombre oure dayes, that we maye applie oure hertes unto wysdome

The wide circulation of Coverdale’s Psalter explains most of these parallels, especially since Coverdale’s version (as in the Great Bible) was included in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer in 1549 (STC 16267) and in subsequent printings into the twentieth century.\(^{17}\) I have been unable to find any other instance of this particular prayer, and suggest that it should be read as an original composition of biblical adaptation. In its reliance on the Psalms for the majority of its substance, this prayer speaks to what has been called ‘the range of psalmic influence in the early modern period’.\(^{18}\)

While I have no means of identifying a definite author of this prayer, a few observations are possible. First, I would like to direct attention back to the title of the printed book, *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, and suggest that this inscription represents a reader’s direct engagement with the book. As the title suggests, this work was written as a conduct book for females, with the purpose of providing the proper behavior and submissive roles of women. More to the point is a passage in chapter five of Hyrde’s translation, titled ‘Of the lernyng of maydes’:\(^{19}\)


And whan she shall lerne to wryte, let nat her example be voyde verses, nor wanton or tryflynge songes: but some sad sentence, prudent and chaste, taken out of holy scripture, or the sayenges of philosophers: whiche by often wrytyng she maye fasten better in her memory. (E2r)

As an amalgamation of verses copied from the Bible, the handwritten inscription exhibits the type of practice encouraged in this passage of *Instruction of a Christen Woman*. The prayer, then, should be understood as a direct engagement with the pedagogical book in following its precepts for female scribal activity. In this, it is tempting to suggest that the writer of this prayer was a female reader—though this is only speculation without more substantial evidence. The act of writing in this instance also goes beyond scribal copying to become a form of adaptation; it manifests as an act of authorial creation. Should this inscription be understood as a type of reaction to the book by stepping out of the practices that it establishes? Read in this way, the handwriting becomes an act of confrontation toward the book’s precepts, creating a tension between the printed authority and the reader’s scribal reaction.

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