

The Psalms and medieval English literature. From the conversion to the Reformation. Edited by Tamara Atkin and Francis Leneghan. Pp. xviii + 344 incl. 18 figs and 16 tables. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017. £60. 978 1 84384 435 8
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Literary surveys which try to impose order on a complex topic over many years too often deliver only a sense of fragmentation, but here is a welcome exception. Collectively, these thirteen essays confirm a continuity of intellectual immersion in the Latin psalter through eight centuries and highlight a relentless creative engagement with it by successive writers in the English language. They show how the Davidic idiom became a staple of inspiration for the performance of piety, whether personal or public, monastic or kingly, and a potent source of renewal for the Church.

After an introduction, the essays are arranged in three thematic (and somewhat overlapping) sections. The first, 'Translation', opens with a lucid survey by Jane Roberts (chapter i) of fifteen Anglo-Saxon Latin psalters that are glossed in Old English in a confusing variety of ways, from full continuous translation to the piecemeal addition of occasional glosses. There is much subsequent alteration, too, often reflecting differences between the Latin of the 'Romanum' textual tradition and that of the 'Gallican', which came to dominate in England. One of the psalters in Roberts's list is the twelfth-century Eadwine Psalter, an astonishing manuscript carrying three different Latin texts (including the 'Hebraicum'). It is the Romanum that carries an Old English gloss, supplied by several different scribes with a notable tendency to use archaic linguistic forms. Mark Faulkner's enlightening account of this puzzling text (chapter ii) suggests that we approach it in the manner of art historians who are 'sensitive to the aesthetic possibilities of archaism'.

The fourteenth-century English prose Psalter has been overshadowed by the Wycliffite Bible project, but Annie Sutherland's essay (chapter iii) describes an accomplished version which consistently and deliberately eschews 'literal' sense for 'meaning', using the rhetoric of simplicity to communicate to novices as well as to more advanced religious. On the Wycliffite Bible itself, Elizabeth Solopova (chapter iv) uses the evidence of the Psalms texts to reassess manuscripts of both the seemingly more literal 'early version' and those of a more idiomatic 'later version' (though this division often in fact breaks down). She supports the view that, whatever the version, the Wycliffite project was always primarily an academic venture for professional religious, even if it also afforded access to Scripture for the intelligent layperson. It was Wycliffites also who, as Katherine Zieman shows (chapter v), took Richard Rolle's *English Psalter*, created by him for a solitary religious woman, and expanded it in a campaign of scholarly and evangelical zeal through three main revisions, of which some fifty manuscripts survive.

The volume's second section, 'Adaptation', returns first to the Anglo-Saxon period, with Francis Leneghan (chapter vi) usefully reminding us that Jerome's Latin version(s) of the Psalms all but eliminated the celebrated lyricism of the original Hebrew poems. Thus the composer of the Old English Metrical Psalter set out to make the Psalms memorable by 'revoicing' them, using his own native metrical techniques and sense of 'linguistic decorum'. It is good to see this work being judged on its own terms, not dismissed as a poor relation of the mainstream Old English poems. Daniel Anlezark (chapter vii) examines another neglected text, the so-called Old English Office, which he sees as an attempt to mingle forms of

the liturgy with the Bedan tradition of the abbreviated psalter, presumably aimed at the devout who could not follow the full cycle of offices in Latin. The Old English poets will have had the 'mood music' of the Psalms in their blood, but identifying specific points of influence on their poems is hard. Although Jane Toswell (chapter viii) states that there are structural and stylistic parallels, as well as thematic ones, she gives sketchy details. It is a pity that the only complete example of an Old English poem that she offers for stylistic examination is a metrically untypical one and that she compares it with a Psalm not in Latin but in a modern English translation; and more consideration could have been given to the fact that the 'heroic' tradition in which Old English poetry originated was already a natural home for praise (as well as for lament). As far as the influence of the Psalms on Middle English verse is concerned, Mike Rodman Jones (chapter ix) shows effectively that the alliterative poets of *Piers Plowman*, *St Erkenwald* and *Pearl* used extracts, not to let their characters indulge in individual 'Davidic imitation', but for more communal purposes of exegesis and argument related to the concerns of the Church.

The four essays which comprise the final section, 'Voices', are absorbing studies of how the psalter powered a succession of initiatives aimed at ecclesiastical and/or political renewal. Lynn Staley (chapter x) sees Richard Maidstone's Penitential Psalms as the dramatisation of the journey of a soul from terror to humility and conversion, and compares them with the *Concordia* which Maidstone wrote in Latin verse for Richard II, as a sort of reconciliatory speech which the wayward king might have given to the City of London after his quarrel with them. Vincent Gillespie (chapter xi) shows how writers from Rolle onwards sought to transmit their psalmodic inspiration by the mechanism of *enargeia*, or 'effective operation', developed by the Greeks; and David Lawton (chapter xii) sees in Eleanor Hull's fourteenth-century multi-voiced commentary on the Penitential Psalms a sophisticated 'reform program' for the Church. Similarly, Michael P. Kuczynski (chapter xiii), drawing on sources from the whole medieval period, shows how a concept of the Church was constructed from the material of the Psalms. Especially welcome in his essay is a brief discussion of the Old English translation of Psalms i–1 attributed to King Alfred (d. 899). The latter was the first English king to perform piety in the Davidic tradition and the absence of a full chapter on him in what aims to be a 'comprehensive survey' is surprising.

This is a handsomely produced book and mostly well edited, though several of the chapters would have benefited from intervention to improve syntax and clarify obscurities; some errors of translation and linguistic analysis might have been spotted, too. But such irritating matters cannot detract from the overall value of the volume, with essays that are always interesting and often exhilarating to read. For over eight hundred years the Psalms stimulated a vast body of English writings whose restless creators juggled exegetical scholarship and evangelical passion to encourage both personal devotion and renewal of the Church, and often to redefine kingship. Their influence cannot be ignored in the study of the literature and history of medieval England.