

## Book Reviews

### Pre-1800

TAMARA ATKIN and FRANCIS LENEGHAN, eds. *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2017. Pp. 362. \$99.00 (cloth).

doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.1

*The Psalms and Medieval English Literature* is a dense, well-researched collection focusing on translation, adaptation, and voice. Admirably far ranging, the collection includes essays on Anglo-Saxon literature, early Middle English literature, and later Middle English literature. It concludes with a fine essay by Michael Kuczynski that looks forward in time toward the Protestant Reformation. The essays are uniformly of high intellectual quality, and many are generously illustrated; many also include detailed tables of data to illustrate complex arguments.

The volume begins with an introduction by co-editor Francis Leneghan that mirrors the temporal scope of the collection as a whole. Leneghan traces vernacular treatment of the opening verse of Psalm 50 from c. 700 to c. 1500. This introduction nicely sets up thematic issues and methodologies that emerge throughout the volume, and it establishes the centrality of the Psalms to medieval English religious and literary cultures.

The section on translation opens with Jane Roberts's essay about Anglo-Saxon psalters. This beautifully illustrated piece categorizes the Old English glosses of psalters as ranging from opportunistic, to added, to ruled for, to integral, exploring in the process the ways in which categories overlap and blur. Her contribution is followed by Mark Faulkner's work on twelfth-century literary culture. Faulkner avoids the polarization that has characterized scholarship on the English glosses of this psalter, charting a middle course to argue that the gloss shifts between the archaic and the contemporary. Admirably considering the wider stakes of this phenomenon, he posits that the glosses reveal twelfth-century cultural ambivalence about the functions of English as a literary language. Annie Sutherland moves the conversation about translation into the fourteenth century with her essay covering fourteenth-century psalters. Attending to a text that, as she notes, has been largely overshadowed by Richard Rolle's *English Psalter*, she makes a case for the significance of the *Prose Psalter* in London literary

culture. She also identifies an Anglo-Norman source that is earlier than the henceforth generally accepted BN 6260 and explores the significance of the elision of translation and commentary throughout the text. Elizabeth Solopova's essay "The Wycliffite Psalms" also breaks new ground, as she departs from traditional assumptions about the popular nature of this text to argue for its "professionalism in both its execution and likely use" (128). Katherine Zieman's piece on Rolle's *English Psalter* closes the section on translation. She attends to early reception of this text, in particular the Wycliffite revisions, considering the ways in which these revisions demonstrate Wycliffite interest in commentary and interpretation in addition to their established interest in editorial methods for bolstering vernacular authority.

The section on adaptation begins with Leneghan's essay "Making the Psalter Sing." Bringing welcome attention to a little studied text, Leneghan explores the way in which the versifier uses traditional Old English alliterative verse techniques to enhance the alliteration already present in Jerome's Latin prose, noting that the versifier thus restores the musicality originally present in the Hebrew but largely lost through the processes of translation into Greek and Latin. Daniel Anlezark next addresses the ways in which psalms feature in the office of prime in the *Old English Benedictine Office*. He argues that the psalms extracted in this office may be seen as a form of an abbreviated psalter in the tradition of Bede and the *Book of Cerne*. M. J. Toswell focuses on the presence of psalm genres in Old English poetry, compellingly making a case for ways in which the psalms influence the kinds of poetry written in Old English. Toswell describes the psalms as a sort of "*basso continuo* ... for developing chronicles, laments, songs of praise of a ruler or divinity, mnemonics, complaints ... and songs of thanksgiving" (232). The section on adaptation finishes with Mike Rodman Jones's study of psalms in *Piers Plowman*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *Pearl*. He considers the "exegetical, rhetorical mechanics" (234) that shape translations of passages of the psalms in these Middle English texts, and he notes thematic connections involving law, meed, and merit that characterize the appearance of psalm passages in these poems.

Lynn Staley's essay about the Maidstone Psalms opens the final section of the volume, which focuses on voice. Building on her earlier work on Maidstone's *Concordia*, Staley discusses ways in which Maidstone's *Penitential Psalms* "dramatize the interior process by which abjection is transformed through grace," in contrast to the *Concordia*, which depicts for Richard II only a "putative" conversion (256). Vincent Gillespie's essay explores, in a wide range of medieval texts, the ways in which the effects and functions of poetry are linked to the functions performed by the poetry of the Psalms. David Lawton's essay "Psalms as Public Interiorities: Eleanor Hull's Voices" is especially intriguing. Largely revising and enriching earlier perspectives on the nature of Hull's work, Lawton argues that her "learned and sophisticated commentary" (316) may "owe its origin in part to the cloister" (317). Kuczynski's excellent final essay about medieval ecclesiology extends his well-known previous work on the psalms in later medieval England. Here he examines the ways in which Middle English translations and commentaries on the Psalms contribute to the development of medieval English theology of the church. He considers texts both orthodox and Wycliffite and extends his focus into the era of the Protestant reformation.

This is an excellent collection of essays that should be of interest to scholars and students of both medieval English literature and medieval English religion. I appreciated the ways in which Old and Middle English were put into dialogue with each other in the first two sections of the collection, so I was somewhat disappointed not to find an essay focusing primarily on Old English literature in the section on voice. However, that is a minor criticism of what is all in all a volume very much worth reading in its entirety.

Nancy Bradley Warren  
*Texas A&M University*  
[nwarren@tamu.edu](mailto:nwarren@tamu.edu)