

Annie Sutherland, *English Psalms in the Middle Ages 1300-1450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) ISBN: 9780198726364 (Hardcover); 320 pages; £60.

Annie Sutherland's book takes on the relatively rarely explored territory of Middle English translation of the Psalms, perhaps the best known and most quoted book of the Bible in that period. A fairly compact volume, *English Psalms in the Middle Ages* delineates the various examples of translation, abbreviation, and paraphrase of the Psalter with rigour and clarity, framing these texts with discussions of medieval translation theory, literary and devotional contexts, and the material culture in which the psalms circulated. Sutherland's interpretative survey provides a wealth of information for anyone interested in the medieval usage of this central biblical text, and highlights areas in which there is still significant historical and literary investigation to be done.

As anyone with even a passing familiarity with medieval Christianity knows, the Psalter formed the backbone of the Western liturgy and as such was foundational to the devotional and mental landscape of medieval English people. The antiphonal structure of the Divine Office, which pulsed through the daily life of the devout and the interlocking cycles of the ecclesiastical year, rested largely on this particular book. This centrality in public worship contributed to the place of the psalms in the educational sphere: they were often placed alongside such doctrinal staples as the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria as the site of basic religious and linguistic instruction (for eminently practical reasons, the main recipients of such education being those who would take on the responsibility of liturgical enactment). It was widely assumed that most, if not all, of the psalms were authored by King David, the 'man after God's own heart', and that they were conventionally interpreted in a highly Christocentric fashion, effecting a thoroughgoing assimilation of ancient poetry to the typological and devotional concerns of the medieval Church.

The introduction to this volume elaborates on some of these aspects of the Psalter, and elucidates the central theme of the investigation: the complex relationship between the Vulgate text and the various forms of vernacular translation. The late medieval interaction of Middle English with Latin is a field which has been approached from numerous vantage points in literary-historical criticism, and Sutherland takes care throughout the book to avoid reductive concepts of the place of either language in this textual culture. In the case of the Psalter and its translations, she argues, it is better overall to see the relationship of Latin and vernacular not as competitive, but as responsive and creative, enabling 'the liberation of a new voice... at once devotional and literary' (p. 6).

Chapter 1, 'Psalm Dissemination', lays the foundations of the investigation, tabulating and contextualising the kinds of psalm 'translation' to be found in English devotional literature. Wholesale renderings of the entire Psalter into the vernacular, including Richard Rolle's popular version and the relevant section of the Wycliffite Bible, form only one category in this survey. Other forms include English-language primers, which, as educational texts built around liturgical patterns, necessarily included piecemeal psalmic translation; abbreviated and paraphrased versions of individual psalms or groups (the latter represented chiefly by the Seven Penitential

Psalms, which in their particular devotional aptness take on a quasi-independent identity); and bilingual, interpretative commentaries which freely traverse the territory of both academic and devotional engagement with the biblical text. The chapter highlights in particular the difficulty of distinguishing the orthodox and the heterodox in this area, given the intermingling of activities and networks often labelled as heterodox with patently mainstream texts and contexts. The Wycliffite psalms, for example, are characterised as ‘volumes which could well have been used to complement entirely orthodox devotional activity’ (p. 64).

Chapter 2, ‘Theorizing Translation’, completes the preliminary material by discussing the theoretical underpinnings of the activity of translation from Latin in the medieval period. Building on the work of Rita Copeland, the chapter examines the paradoxical relationship between, firstly, the classical model of translation as an activity of ‘differentiation from the source text’, which sometimes even took the form of ‘contestation and displacement’ (p. 66), derived from Cicero’s definition of *non verbum pro verbo*; and, secondly, the ‘sacramental, incarnational view of words themselves’ (p. 69) which led Jerome to advise the closest literalism in the translation of the scriptural text. This groundwork established, Chapters 3 and 4 on ‘The Practice of Translation’ – the former dealing with complete psalters, the latter with abbreviated and paraphrased versions – analyse how these ideological and methodological influences manifested in the various textual traditions of vernacular psalms.

These two chapters form the core of the book’s thesis, reconfiguring a simplistic, ancestral view of the different kinds of psalm translation which would see them as a ‘chain’ of developing versions where each one builds on the previous one. Instead, Sutherland proposes the concept of a ‘vibrant late-medieval psalmic nexus’ (p. 113) in which translators worked along a spectrum of literal closeness to the Vulgate text and incorporated glossing and interpretation with varying degrees of separation from the original. The links between texts, therefore, are not always those we would expect, an assertion amply demonstrated by the analysis of the direct relation of the psalmic text of Middle English primers to the Early and Later Versions of the Wycliffite Psalter (pp. 141-9) – the most conventional of genres incorporating a foundational text of heterodoxy.

A number of useful new perspectives arise from this discussion, particularly in the care Sutherland takes to distinguish between modern (often negative) judgements of the literary value of some of these texts, and the aims and values which gave rise to these qualities. Conventional assumptions about the processes of vernacularization make it difficult to fully appreciate the existence of a ‘quasi-sacramental tradition’ (p. 98) surrounding the very words of the biblical text, as well as the ways of reading both English and Latin, in some cases in tandem, which contributed to the various catechetical and devotional functions of the translated (or adapted, or paraphrased) Psalter. The practice of supplementing imitative translation with commentary or interpretation is analysed in detail, reaching an apex in the psalm commentary of Eleanor Hull which is ‘quite content to allow vernacularization and commentary to intermingle’ (p. 182). Thus, it produces a

ruminative, expansive journey through the biblical texts in which attention to the 'lettre' liberates rather than limits' (p. 184). Throughout, we are never allowed to settle into a reflexive definition of the role of 'translator', but are pushed to consider and re-consider the intentions and priorities of those who produced English psalms.

Chapter 5, 'Reading the English Psalms', turns to the reading experience of those who engaged with these translations, in terms both of repeated scribal copying and of the reading of completed texts, and considers how the Psalter 'seek[s] a reading which is also a doing' (p. 208). The particular efficacy of psalm-reading as a form of prayer is a widespread motif in medieval devotional discourse, and this chapter demonstrates how the Psalter collapses Old and New Testament holiness, requiring its readers to live 'lives of New Testament obedience of these Old Testament precepts' (p. 211); its existence in English becomes a crucial part of this mediating moral power.

The book concludes in Chapter 6, 'The English Psalms?', by examining the material context of the translated psalms, specifically the ways in which Latin and English interact on the page. Texts presenting solely the English version of the psalm(s) are in the minority; instead, the vast majority have some kind of Latin incipit or parallel text, allowing for linguistic engagement (indeed, Rolle in particular identifies his text as an aid to language learning) and for the reader to key him- or herself into the appropriate liturgical setting with the cue of the Vulgate text. This perspective further problematizes simplistic conceptions of the relationship of Latin to English, with assumptions of hierarchy and/or competition only functioning to a certain extent. While a 'hierarchy of descent' (p. 231) seems an appropriate way to describe some manuscripts, in others there is the sense that Latin is simply useful, 'a means of facilitating cross-referencing' (p. 233) and sometimes little more. Overall, the impression given is of a climate of 'experimenting with the vernacular as a language of devotion' (p. 255), rather than of aggressive ideological vernacularization.

The volume concludes with an acknowledgement of the work still to be done on many areas of its investigation, from the generic identity and use of the English primers to the exact relation of heterodox and orthodox usage of Latin and English; it is clear, however, that this book presents a significant amount of important new work in the fields of medieval translation, devotion, and heterodoxy. Further research into these areas and into that of the medieval psalms in particular will be facilitated by the clearly arranged and technically fluent argument, a number of full-page images from under-researched manuscripts, and four appendices which list the extant manuscripts of each different type of psalm translation and adaptation discussed. One of the clearest themes of the book is the unique versatility and fertility of the Psalter, expressed by several different writers in terms of garden metaphors. Indeed, 'the psalms 'flourished' or produced meaning as they were read by the devout' (p. 275) in the Middle Ages, and are given the same opportunity to act as a touchstone of meaning in this accomplished volume.

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