

T. Atkin and F. Leneghan (eds), *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017. xviii + 344 pp. £60. ISBN 978-1-843-844-35-8

If a thorough knowledge of the psalms was a fundamental requirement for medieval authors who could recite and adapt large parts of the psalter from memory, modern scholars tend to lack such intuitive knowledge of this genre. In that sense, the gap between the medieval and modern reception of a text type was perhaps never greater than with the psalms. Specialist publications on the topic must surely represent essential reading to all medievalists aiming to understand a genre that was so widely known among earlier generations. The volume under discussion here is the latest such contribution. The line-up of contributors is impressively diverse in terms of research specialization, and includes three scholars, Jane Toswell, Annie Sutherland, and Michael P. Kuczynski who have previously published monographs on the Psalter. The volume aims to complement a publication which arose from a conference on early modern psalm reception, *Re-Forming the Psalms in Tudor England*, ed. Ruth Ahnert, a special issue of *Renaissance Studies* 29.4 (2015).

The contributions in this informative volume have something for everyone: both Old English and Middle English are covered, discussing texts by known authors as well as anonymous examples, old favourites as well as less well-known material. There is also some coverage of manuscript production, glossing practices, bilingual treatments of psalms, their function in liturgical or para-liturgical material, laity involvement, and prosody. The main scope, however, is that of psalm reception in the vernacular.

Psalmic reflexes in Anglo-Latin texts are not discussed in detail here, but would also repay further attention, for example in the case of authors known to have recycled remembered reading in their own poetic productions, such as Aldhelm. Another area not covered in explicit terms is the role played by psalms in education and school-teaching, although

several contributors acknowledge that their medieval authors seem to have memorised and re-deployed psalmic tags. There does not seem to be much detailed analysis here, however, of how authors came to internalise such material in the first place, or how the memorisation of sources might affect the literary diction of the authors under discussion.

The volume opens with a superb introduction by Francis Leneghan, scholarly yet lucid, which uses Psalm 50:1–3 as a case study to lead the reader first through Anglo-Saxon and then post-Conquest reactions to these verses. The rest of the contributions are subdivided into three parts of roughly equal length: ‘Translation’ (35–170), ‘Adaptation’ (173–252), and ‘Voice’ (255–335), with thirteen contributions in all. The first of these includes a discussion by Jane Roberts on psalter glossing, a dialectological reconstruction of the exemplar of the Eadwine Psalter glosses by Mark Faulkner, an essay by Annie Sutherland on the translation strategies of the anonymous fourteenth-century *Prose Psalter*, and one by Elizabeth Solopova addressing the scholarly pitch of Wycliffite Psalms; it concludes with Katherine Zieman’s analysis of how Richard Rolle’s *English Psalter* was used.

The section on ‘Adaptation’ opens with Francis Leneghan tracing rhythmical patterns in the Old English *Metrical Psalms*. Daniel Anlezark provides a much-needed exploration of the role played by psalms in the bilingual *Old English Office* — a title which Anlezark prefers to the received name *Old English Benedictine Office*, as ‘there is no obvious indication that it is based closely on the Benedictine rather than another kind of office and, as it does not include seasonal antiphons or a cycle of psalms and appropriate lessons, it is not really an office’ (202–3).

Jane Toswell investigates links between psalms and the Old English poetic tradition, with particular focus on *Bede’s Death Song*, stanzaic structures in *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *Deor*, and memorial elements in *Beowulf*. Mike Rodman Jones concludes this section by analysing the act of psalm reading in passages of *Piers Plowman*, *St Erkenwald* and *Pearl*.

The final part of the volume, centred on ‘Voice’, has Lynn Staley exploring the relationship between Richard Maidstone’s *Penitential Psalms* and his *Concordia* in their historical context. Vincent Gillespie dissects the concept of *enargeia* in psalmic discourse, ranging from classical Greek and Latin authors and authorities to patristic texts and medieval vernacular materials. Eleanor Hull’s fifteenth-century commentary on the Penitential Psalms is the subject of David Lawton’s contribution, querying the intended audience of this text. The ecclesiological themes of *vox ecclesiae* and *vox Christi* are explored in the final article by Michael P. Kuczynski, closing with the image of the ‘Church of the Psalms’, inhabited by both worshippers and the refuge-seeking sparrow of Psalm 83, as ‘the Bible’s most multi-vocalic book’ (335).

What comes across in many articles here is the medieval authors’ dogged engagement with complex psalmic diction, especially its archaism, as ‘a form of English that would have been comprehensible but strange’ (100) to the medieval authors under discussion. For example, Faulkner’s engaging analysis of the language of the Eadwine Psalter glosses shows that this long-maligned text does not reflect so much any standard version of twelfth-century language, but is the result of a partial ‘modernisation’ of ninth-century forms. The impression is that ‘twelfth-century readers shared the modern notion that archaism could be efficacious in conveying the dignity of scripture’ (99), while a need to produce a comprehensible text led to some interesting linguistic compromises. Faulkner’s case study also highlights the long-lasting value of psalmic materials within the Old English and Middle English periods, with older productions (in this case, ninth-century Mercian ones) influencing later English efforts.

There are eighteen high-quality black-and-white plates illustrating early medieval psalter manuscripts, particularly in terms of the complex *mise-en-page* of psalms and their glosses in Roberts’s contribution. To judge from the index, almost every psalm is discussed in this volume, with some numbers appearing as the particular favourites of both the medieval

authors under discussion and the contributors to the volume: 17 (*Diligamte Domine*), 50 (*Miserere mei*), 83 (*Quam dilecta*), 85 (*Inclina Domine aurem tuam*), 118 (*Beati immaculati in via*), 129 (*De profundis*). (The index does not clarify why only some, but not all, secondary authors are listed here with separate entries). A handy timeline listing the highlights of psalter production as discussed in the volume can be found on pp. xvii–xviii. The impressive number of cross-references between the essays will encourage readers to browse and learn outside their own normal fields of expertise.

In sum, this volume represents an impressively systematic and indispensable investigation of one of the most central texts used in the Western Middle Ages. Its readers owe a great debt to the contributors for their clear and informative analyses. The volume should be regarded as a handbook of early English psalter studies.

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