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Teaching Donne on the Sidney Psalms

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This brief pedagogical report comes in two parts, one on my students' sometimes puzzled reactions to Donne's poem on the Sidney Psalter and the other on some of the poem's cultural background. One part expresses my confusions and dilemmas as a teacher who loves this poem but recognizes its difficulty. The other is meant to suggest a few contexts that might be particularly useful in helping students grasp even more confidently some of the concepts and allusions that give the poem's lines their resonance.

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The Good Book: As an experiment, I told a set of clever and diligent English majors in a required course on the Renaissance that I was going to talk to a group of Renaissance scholars about the class's responses to a poem by Donne on the Sidney Psalter. I distributed the text and asked them please to tell me what they thought they would need to know in order to understand the poem. What about it or its language or allusions might give them pause? What might they want me to elucidate? Aside from their struggles with gnarled syntax, what struck me, albeit predictably, was the degree of ignorance of biblical literature and of theology. My fellow panelists and I at the 2007 Donne conference had agreed not to spend our time complaining about our students' inadequacies, including a bafflement over religious matters that in my experience does not, curiously, correlate very well with their degree of

religious belief and that in any case is unsurprising.[1] The pedagogical challenge of such ignorance, however, is serious when teaching Donne. Only one student said—and quite sincerely, she told me later—that she was "not familiar with religion" and went on, depressingly, to inquire about the identity of David and Moses; but there were a few other less dramatic expressions of confusion over the names in the poem (as well as a few otherwise informed allusions in comments on the Sidney psalms themselves, several of which I had them read, to the "Hebrew translation" of the Psalter. A colleague suggested that, on the basis of the common designation, the King James "Version," some students may think that "translation" in biblical matters means "version").

Vocabulary and imagery: Modern students have little trouble with Donne's image of squaring the circle; after all, my college has a quantitative reasoning requirement, and I pass along the joke about the Harvard professor of mathematics who tells his wife he is going out for a walk and will "circle the Square." But one other image provoked a more intriguing response. That the Sidney Psalter is the work of two siblings allows Donne his witty claim that just as the psalms were written "in a cloven tongue," being by both David and Christ, now Philip and Mary have split that cleft and produced what one could call a quadruple authorship. Some of my all-too-subtle students, taught by my department to examine texts closely with ears open—sometimes too open—for ambiguities and complexities, heard a dissonant allusion to that famous figure who in snake form spoke to Eve with a double tongue and who in his own traditional shape sports a cloven hoof. Was not Donne being subtly critical of the paired Sidneys, they asked, by thus evoking Satan? I had explained, if inadequately, the complex matter of the psalms' double authorship in a traditional Christian understanding, but I resolved that next time I would also stress even harder the events during Pentecost (Acts 2:3): not just satanic hooves but also divine fire can be "cloven."

And, something I had not anticipated: one or two students saw a sexual overtone to Donne's use of "organ"; this reading, which I can in fact imagine appearing in modern scholarship, relies on the common

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[1]Undergraduate ignorance about older English history is less disorienting, so I was not *very* disturbed to read on a midterm exam for a course on Shakespeare that the War of the Roses was between the Tudors and the Stuarts.

modern euphemism "organ" to mean what Donne's generation was more likely to specify as the "[male] member" or "yard." Yes, the overtone several of my students heard is grotesque, or so it would probably seem to most professors, and next time I will be sure to remind them before we begin that earlier in the term I had distributed pictures of the universe as an organ and also of man as a microcosm of that musical cosmos (there are wonderful images of this sort in S. K. Heninger's *Touches of Sweet Harmony* and in his *Cosmographical Glass*[2]); one shows the universe as a giant lute with a divine hand tuning all spheres at once. Like organs, we live through the intake and expulsion of air and everything air can represent and be. There is much more in the poem to explain or query, but the cloven tongue and the "organ" were what produced the most startling comments.

Gender: Mary and Philip are in some sense merged even if the original tongue of the psalms is (re)cloven by their translation, but what do we make of Donne's comparison of them to the biblical siblings Moses and Miriam? If we take this analogy seriously then at least a little of Mary's femaleness is preserved, even if the poet Miriam does not always behave well in the biblical narrative, criticizing her brother for his marriage to a (black) Ethiopian and as a result suffering from a temporary case of (white) leprosy (Numbers 12). To compare Mary Sidney to Miriam is to compliment her skill in song, but one member of the class wondered if Donne also felt ambivalently about the Countess's position as a powerful sister. Does the negative part of Miriam's story matter in the least? Is it delusional to think so? My pedagogical point is that the efforts we often rightly make to encourage students to find not just seven but seventy times seven types of ambiguity can lead to peculiar results. Or are they peculiar? In any case, to praise Mary as another Miram raises interesting questions about Mary as David and the gender of any modern female voice that joins itself to that of the male psalmist (and hence to that of Christ in whom, however, there is neither male nor female, or so says St. Paul). Is the speaker in Mary Sidney's psalms gendered, and how? Scholars who write on her do not quite agree on

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[2]Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1974) and *The Cosmographical Glass: Renaissance Diagrams of the Universe* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1977).

what pronouns to use. For that matter, as I would tell students if there were time, I have noticed in two late sixteenth-century French religious sonneteers, Anne de Marquets and Gabrielle de Coignard, that the closer these two women approach paraphrasing or quoting David, rather than merely alluding to a psalm, the more they avoid the gendering of their speaking voice, an avoidance easy enough in English but one that in French, with its greater use of grammatical gender, requires some strategic planning. In terms of gender, moreover, although Mary Sidney translated two-thirds of the Psalter, Sidney's comparison of the siblings to Moses and Miriam potentially demotes the Countess, a mere sister of the great leader who died before full victory and who was the greater writer (Donne would have assumed that Moses was the divinely inspired author of the Pentateuch). Donne's compliment is witty and gracious, but not entirely comfortable for feminists to ponder.[3]

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Renaissance psalmody's complex popularity: Several students wrote "hunh?" next to the claim that David's lyrics are "so well attired abroad, so ill at home." They were, of course, not alone, as witness modern disagreements as to whether "abroad" means in church (not chambers) or across the Channel in Geneva, France, and/or the Netherlands. I would add Italy. The verse translations by Sternhold and Hopkins, used in the English church, are receiving a little better press these days, and rightly so, but to show the class what Donne probably meant, although perhaps unfairly because they are meant to be sung by many voices, I recite several lines from their psalms. Equally or more important, and armed with materials from any number of modern studies, particularly the rich study by Michel Jeanneret, *Poésie et tradition biblique au XVI^e siècle*,[4] I suggest that for many years translating the psalms had been not an exercise in piety only but also a way of tapping into the same mysterious energies that had made the rocks and trees move to Orpheus's music, or

[3]I am assuming that Donne means to associate Mary with Miriam and Philip with Moses, but perhaps that is too literal-minded and each set of siblings is sufficiently twinned to count as one only semi-cloven entity.

[4]Jeanneret, *Poésie et tradition biblique au XVI^e siècle, recherches stylistiques sur les paraphrases des "Psaumes," de Marot à Malherbe* (Paris: J. Corti, 1969).

the demon to leave Saul at the sound of David's harp, or for that matter the planets and stars to circle the earth, singing. Indeed, as one scholar has pointed out, late classical images of Orpheus can be indistinguishable from those of David.[5] Much psalm translation, furthermore, offered a way to comment on politics, if only implicitly (Margaret Hannay's work is particularly helpful in this regard). What Donne is praising, here, is not sober Sunday-school respectability of the sort that some students share but that others either associate with everything they hope to escape or that they find mystifyingly alien. It is a source and transmission of *power*, a participation in cosmic harmony, an exploitation of what one might call spiritual electro-magnetism.

The Sidney Psalter, in sum, is aesthetically pleasing, spiritually moving, and politically charged, but it also shimmers with some of the same power (or so the translators doubtless hoped, with or without actual musical settings) that can expel demons, accelerate horses, raise city walls, shame drunks, attract dolphins, rouse or relax Alexander, dissolve the brain's black bile, keep wives chaste (or otherwise, if the seducer uses the Lydian mode), cure tarantula bites, and calm crying babies by rebalancing their overly moist humour.[6] Psalms could thus offer hopes for reviving ancient wisdom and the quasi-magical "effects" of music on the material and political world. Hence the significance of Donne's allusions to an organ and to the human body as organic in every sense of the word. We are both music-making and the instrument on which music can be made. As one expression of Renaissance humanism, moreover, literary and adroit psalm translation was affiliated with a world of international learning and yet also socially elegant, especially if avoiding fourteeners or common meter for the varied forms and meters

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[5]Orpheus on at least one occasion had a biblical connection, for an old story had him studying with Moses; see "Psaumes" in John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 11ff., citing a Greek *Testament of Orpheus*.

[6]I take my examples, many of them of course familiar, from materials cited in my "'Forms of Joy and Art': Donne, David, and the Power of Music," *John Donne Journal* 25 (2006): 3–36; see that essay's notes for earlier scholarly studies. There have been several books on English psalm translation, most notably Hannibal Hamlin's splendid *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

that bore a chic European look, whether the French of Clément Marot or of the innumerable other vernacular and Latin metrical versions.

The psalms were so associated with music, with the harp or psaltery and with the mysteries of cosmic harmony and number, that Donne's images are in no way surprising, yet the fact remains that we have little or no evidence that the Sidneys themselves envisaged their translations being sung. Whether they are suitable for congregational signing has been debated (my own view, derived from years of experience singing awkwardly set poems masquerading as hymns, is that congregations can sing almost anything, if badly), but they might do very well with a lute.

Musical Debates: Students can be interested, because surprised, to hear the degree to which music's role in Christian worship was once debated. What could be more respectable than to sing hymns in church and listen to organ music? And yet the way in which some churchmen and others so passionately defend such practices shows that there was at least an atmosphere of defensive debate. Hence the frequency with which one finds mainstream Anglican clerics praising it, often citing David's cure of Saul as an example of its beneficial powers. Overt attacks on music, not just recitation, are harder to find but are implied by the many defenses and there are certainly traces of surly opposition. The Bible, and not least David himself in his psalms, would seem to justify instrumental music, and there is music in Heaven and cacophony in Hell.[7]

But need one *sing* the psalms? After all, one can—and does—recite them. Traditionally we speak of David harping, and presumably singing, although one could imagine a recitation, and while those who did not want instrumental or organ music in church usually allowed sober singing of the psalms, even that piety, in some spirits, required explicit defense. This too interests students; after all, it was not too long ago that a Pope called the guitar a profane instrument, and music remains an area of dispute and worry in our own culture. Many, perhaps most, who stress the value of music in Christian worship cite David's cure of Saul's madness, but in fact there was an argument that students often find entertaining, whatever their own views of the supernatural: how, asked

[7]In Samuel Rowley's *When You See Me You Know Me* (1605) a composer notes that "Musicke is heavenly, for in heaven is musicke," but that while the saved will attend God's "parliament," music's critics will "make" a Hell; see my "'Forms of Joy,'" p. 14.

some authorities, could Saul's demon flee at the sound of a David harp if music works through the body and if demons are incorporeal? Did Saul just have a severe case of melancholia that responded well to musical therapy? Or was it perhaps God's mercy or David's sheer goodness that sent the demon away?[8] That is why Donne's allusion to an *organ*, although hardly papist, situates the imagined harmony as non-Puritan or non-separatist. An *Early English Books Online* search of "organ" for 1580 to 1620 turns up a number of parallels to Donne's organ/organist analogy, and these are useful in showing both the familiarity of the conceit—or beyond-conceit—and its place in celebrations or defenses of music, even if, as my students pointed out, Donne does not make it entirely easy to know who is playing whom or where.

Genre. Donne's poem is an encomium. Is it also a job application? A petition for patronage? It has on occasion been read as shamelessly flattering and self-serving. David Novarr, who also calls it a verse epistle as well as an encomium with sentiments that are "unexceptional," sees it as a self-advancing push for notice, perhaps from William Herbert.[9] But, as my students in their admittedly often tactless and misguided fashion showed, the sentiments get more complicated, or at least so compressed as to edge into the "exceptional" as well as maybe into the exceptionable, to the degree that one puts pressure on them, and other scholars have found the poem's emotional life elsewhere than in flattering the deceased great so as to please their rich heirs.[10]

Problems remain that I would explain to students if there were time: the poem apparently did not circulate. Why not? And why wait so long to write it at all? I do not myself have answers or suggestions, but the very questions are useful in reminding students that Donne's poems, like so many in the period, do not follow the path from pen to print parallel to the one that they themselves would expect to see stretch from their

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[8]For many defenses that imply a consciousness, justified or not, of serious attack, and for arguments about Saul's demon, see my "'Forms of Joy.'"

[9]Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 150–157.

[10]E.g., Raymond-Jean Frontain,"Translating Heavenwards: 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes' and John Donne's Poetics of Praise," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 22 (1996), 103–126. See also Jill Baumgaertner, "'Harmony' in Donne's 'La Corona' and 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes,'" *John Donne Journal* 3 (1984): 142–156.

word processor to e-mail attachments or, in some lucky cases, to *Amazon.com*. The poem's very mysteries—its intention and printing history—offer another opportunity to remember how technologies, authorship, and cultures have changed.

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