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Upon Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes"

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John Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes of Sir *Philip Sidney*, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister" is too rarely read or studied. Even Annabel Patterson's recuperative essay, "All Donne," does not reach quite so far as to include this poem.[1] The reasons for critical neglect are no doubt complex. It is an occasional poem, for one thing, and its occasion was perhaps of limited interest to twentieth-century readers preoccupied with matters of politics, psychology, and sexuality viewed from a largely secular perspective (religion being seen simply as politics in another guise). But recent critical interest has turned, or returned, to religion in its own right, and so the time has come for renewed attention to Donne's occasional poem, while recognizing that the poem moves beyond its apparent occasion to address topics addressed in Donne's better known works. Following a survey of the existing criticism on "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," this effort at literary recuperation will focus on establishing a literary context for the poem, arguing that, rather than being an isolated occasional poem, it actually lies at the center of a small but significant sub-genre of poems about or introducing metrical Psalms, reflecting on the relationship between earthly, liturgical song, the music of the neo-Platonic spheres, and the divine music of the Christian heaven.

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[1]Patterson, "All Donne," in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisamen Maus (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 37–67.

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A good deal of the critical reception of this poem has focused on explaining what Donne meant in his juxtaposition of English Psalms "at home" ("more hoarse, more harsh") with those "abroad."[2] Usually these lines have been read as a comparison between the popular metrical psalms known as Sternhold and Hopkins (officially *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*), sung in English worship services and used for private devotions for a century and a half, versus the more poetically sophisticated translations of Marot and Beza, used for similar purposes in France. Certainly, the Marot-Beza Psalter was the most highly regarded vernacular metrical translation at the time. It would have been easily available to Londoners who wanted to purchase a copy, and Donne and other interested listeners could even have heard them being sung by displaced Huguenots in the so-called "stranger" churches in the city.[3] Richard Todd has also made a good case for taking account of the Dutch metrical psalms of Jan Utenhove.[4] Dutch was a less accessible language to the early modern English than was French, but these translations were also written in sophisticated verse, and they would have been sung by émigré communities in London. A further argument has recently been advanced by Andrew Breeze that Donne may have had Welsh metrical psalms in mind, though this seems more of a stretch.[5] Despite the geographical proximity of Wales to London, Welsh was a considerably

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[2]Donne, "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir *Philip Sidney*, and the Countess of Pembroke his Sister," lines 38, 44, in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent/Everyman, 1985), pp. 332–334. All citations of Donne's poems are from this edition.

[3]See "Literary Context," in *The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon, and Michael G. Brennan, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 2:3–32.

[4]Todd, "'So Well Atty'red Abroad': A Background to the Sidney-Pembroke Psalter and Its Implications for the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 29 (1987): 74–93. See also Robin A. Leaver, *"Goostly psalms and spirituall songes": English and Dutch Metrical Psalms from Coverdale to Utenhove 1535-1566* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 40–54, and chap. 5.

[5]Breeze, "Donne's 'Blest Hermaphrodite' and Psalms 'More Harsh,'" *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 249–254.

stranger language even than Dutch, as the incomprehensible Welsh scenes in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1* make clear. Furthermore, Edmund Prys's *Llyfr y Psalmau* (1621) is described by Breeze as a collection of "simple stanzas to be sung by congregations," which resembles the Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins rather than those of the Sidneys. A more likely candidate for Donne's admiration is George Buchanan's *Psalmorum Davidis*, a translation of the Psalms into highly sophisticated neo-Latin using classical quantitative meters. First published (complete) in 1565, Buchanan's Psalms were frequently reprinted, either on their own or with his other works, and they were highly regarded by contemporary humanists. *Psalmorum Davidis* was also published "abroad," in Paris, Strasbourg and elsewhere (Buchanan spent much of his life on the continent), while the Welsh Psalms of Prys were published only "at home" in England.[6] Ultimately, however, Donne's reference seems to be general rather than specific, and his comparison between Psalms at home and abroad may have been even more extensive, for there were sophisticated metrical psalms available in many languages and literatures, including German, Italian, and Hungarian.

Donne contrasts not only Psalms "at home" and Psalms "abroad" but those in "chambers" and those in "church." Helen Gardner perceives this as being the distinction made in the previous lines too, "home" meaning "church" and "abroad" meaning outside of it—terms standing in for the more familiar "sacred" and "secular."[7] But Gardner's view has not proved popular. In the chambers/church comparison, the negative term, "church," undoubtedly refers once again to Sternhold and Hopkins, the Psalms vilified by poets from George Wither to Alexander Pope. Although there were other versions of the Psalms used in worship (Coverdale's in the Book of Common Prayer, and the Psalms of the major Bible translations), Sternhold and Hopkins were the metrical psalms of choice for church singing from the 1560s until the end of the

[6]I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 247–286. An online text is available, with translation, at Dana F. Sutton's *The Philological Museum* <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/>.

[7]Gardner, ed., *John Donne: The Divine Poems*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 103.

seventeenth century.[8] Identifying the chamber Psalms is slightly more difficult. Certainly, there were versions of select Psalms available in metrical versions by Thomas Wyatt, the Earl of Surrey, Abraham Fraunce, and a few others. But the obvious standout in this category is the Sidney Psalms themselves, the topic of Donne's poem, which were not printed and were not used in public worship, but which nevertheless had circulated widely from chamber to chamber—which is presumably how Donne came to know them. Donne's own poems circulated in similar fashion, described satirically by Michael Drayton (a published poet):

> For such whose poems, be they nere so rare,
> In private chambers that incloistered are,
> And by transcription daintyly must goe;
> As though the world unworthy were to know
> Their rich composures, let those men that keepe
> These wondrous reliques in their judgement deepe,
> And cry them up so, let such Peeces bee
> Spoke of by those that shall come after me . . . .[9]

Drayton's sarcastic description of poems as holy "relics" confined in "private chambers" could be applied to both Donne's and the Sidneys' poems (though there may be a more specific allusion to Donne's "The Relic" in Drayon's "wondrous reliques," which also suggests the Catholicism of Donne's family background).

The church-chamber distinction relates to another question that has intrigued critics: what exactly was the purpose of this poem? Donne appears to be calling for further improvement ("reformation") of the English singing Psalms, arguing that without more accomplished metrical psalms for use in church, the Church itself could not be fully

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[8]Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chaps. 1 and 2.

[9]Drayton, "To My Dearely-Loved Friend Henery Reynolds Esquire, of Poets and Poesie," lines 187–194, in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel, 5 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, for the Shakespeare Head Press, 1961), 3:231. Cited in John Stubbs, *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* (New York and London: Norton, 2007), p. 34; Stubbs reads these lines as a possible reference to Donne.

reformed. But if this poem was intended to intervene in debates about the liturgy and church music, why does it survive in only a single manuscript, from which it has been presumed to have been printed in the 1635 second edition of Donne's *Poems*?[10] David Novarr argues, as does Arthur Marotti, that "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" is not a public poem but a private one, aimed at a very limited coterie, perhaps even a coterie of one: the son of Mary Sidney, William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, who might have helped Donne procure the Deanship of St. Paul's in 1621.[11] Alexander Sackton also reads the poem as a private one, but in the context of a larger argument that all of Donne's verse was intended to be private, and that, indeed, Donne conceived of poetry as "a method of self-exploration and of intimate communication."[12] This makes sense of Donne's apparent strong aversion to print publication, criticized by Drayton, but it sits oddly with a poem whose concern is primarily about public worship. Raymond-Jean Frontain believes that Donne hoped the Sidney Psalms might be used liturgically, but he sees "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" as nevertheless a "private meditation upon a public function."[13]

Such arguments align with questions about the Sidney Psalm themselves, specifically, whether they were ever intended for use in public worship. Copies of the Sidney Psalms survive with annotations suggesting private devotional or even liturgical use, and there are also a few musical settings of select Sidney Psalms for solo voice.[14] Michael Brennan has argued that Mary Sidney may have wished to have the Sidney Psalter printed in 1599 (occasioned by a planned visit to her

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[10]H. J. C. Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 1:348. The manuscript is the O'Flahertie, dating from 1632 and now at Harvard. See Grierson, 2:xcvii-xcvii, and Gardner, pp. lxxxvii-lxxxix.

[11]Novarr, *The Disinherited Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 153–157; Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 284–285.

[12]Sackton, "Donne and the Privacy of Verse," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 7.1 (1967): 67–82, 80.

[13]Frontain, "Translating Heavenwards: 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes' and Donne's Poetics of Praise," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 22 (1996): 118.

[14]Herbert, *Works*, 2:28–29.

home, Wilton House, by Elizabeth I) as a replacement for Sternhold and Hopkins, and he has even suggested that Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" could have been written as early as the late 1590s as a commendatory poem for the Psalter's publication. Such a dating is complicated, however, by Donne's statement that God "hath translated these translators," implying a date after the Countess's death in 1621.[15] Micheline White, on the other hand, proposes that Mary Sidney intended something closer to Frontain's "private meditation upon a public function," writing Psalms for the "chamber" but nevertheless meditating and commenting upon matters of liturgy and public worship.[16]

And yet, despite the named occasion for Donne's poem, "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" does not so narrowly concern issues of psalm translation. Several critics have approached the poem from the broader perspective of religious poetry in general, especially the concern Donne shared with Herbert and others about how to reconcile poetic wit with the self-effacement seemingly required of proper devotion. As Helen Wilcox states, paraphrasing Donne, "those writers who 'dare' . . . to 'seeke new expressions' for God face the inappropriate task of thrusting a 'cornerlesse and infinite' God into 'strait corners of poore wit.'"[17] It is worth noting, too, regarding the poem's metaphor of "squaring the circle" (a famously insoluble mathematical problem, but also proverbial for an impossible task), that the metaphor of the circle is common in Donne's work, as, for example, in his sonnet "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners" and his Easter Sermon on Psalm 89:48:

> That life is a Circle stamped with a print, an endlesse, and perfect Circle, as soone as it begins. Of this Circle, the Mathematician is our great and good God.[18]

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[15]Brennan, "The Queen's Proposed Visit to Wilton House in 1599 and the 'Sidney Psalms,'" *Sidney Journal* 20.1 (2002): 27–53.

[16]White, "Protestant Women's Writing and Congregational Psalms Singing: from the Song of the Exiled 'Handmaid' (1555) to the Countess of Pembroke's *Psalmes* (1599)," *Sidney Journal* 23.1-2 (2005): 61–82.

[17]Wilcox, "Devotional Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 150.

[18]*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), 2:200.

On the problem of seeking "new expressions," Judith Dundas makes a case for Donne's wit as a special means of Grace, a kind of serious play of the sort we also see in Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*.[19] Many of the best studies of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" focus on its exploration of the dilemma of the religious poet: how to "tune" the verse, as Donne puts it, and tune ourselves, as the Sidneys did, and David before them, so that "we may fall in with them, and sing our part," whether here on earth or when we are later "translated" into heaven.

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There are at least two kinds of argument to make for paying closer attention to a neglected poem: first (internal), that there are unrecognized strengths, complexities, points of interest in the poem itself; second (external), that the poem fits meaningfully into literary or other contexts in ways that we haven't noticed. Advances on the former argument have been made by a few critics who have read "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" with the same attention given to the *Songs and Sonets*. They have found that the poem includes complex biblical allusions. For instance, how exactly are the Sidneys like John the Baptist, Moses, Miriam, and David? Heather Asals cites intriguing references to John the Baptist from Donne's sermons:

> *John Baptist* was all voice, yet John Baptist was a fore-runner of Christ. The best words are but words, but they are the fore-

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See Wilcox, "Squaring the Circle: Metaphors of the Divine in the Work of Donne and his Contemporaries," *John Donne Journal* 13.1-2 (1994): 69; David L. Edwards, *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 327. On the metaphor more generally, see John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), chap. 9, "Imagined Corners."

[19]Dundas, "'All Things Are Bigge with Jest': Wit as a Means of Grace," in *New Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, ed. John R. Roberts (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), pp. 124–142.

> runners of Deeds: but Christ himself, as he was God himself, is *Purus Actus*, all Action, all Doing.[20]

Thus, Asals argues that "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," in which the Sidneys are "Two that make one *John Baptists* holy voyce" (17), claims the Psalms as the means by which the religious poet, with his outward voice, can become fully part of the Church, and join with the inward, spiritual voice of Christ, the Word made flesh.

Donne also describes the Sidneys as "*Davids* Successors" (33), however, and Anne Lake Prescott explores the implications of this allusion, which also have to do with much more than patronage and church politics. In the Renaissance, David, like Orpheus, was a figure for the poet in his highest role, as divinely inspired singer. Such inspiration, exemplified in the Psalms, "can propel the mind upward in rapid ecstasy, not just settle it into dutiful piety," and Prescott notes that "it was the power as well as the much-lauded sweetness of David's music that impressed commentators and poets."[21] Donne's concern in "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" with "singing," then, has to do with matters at the center of the Christian faith, not just with promoting a book Donne liked. Donne himself wrote, in a 1618 sermon on Ezekiel 33:32 ("And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song, of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, but they doe them not"), that,

> The greatest mystery of our Religion, indeed the whole body of our Religion, the coming, and the Kingdome of a *Messias*, of a Saviour, of Christ, is conveyed in a Song.[22]

Donne here refers explicitly to the prophecy of the Messiah sung by Habbakuk, but he no doubt also has in mind other biblical singers,

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[20]Donne, Sermon on James 2:12 (*Sermons*, 8:341–342), cited in Asals, "*Davids* Successors: Forms of Joy and Art," *Proceedings of the PMR [Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance] Conference* 2 (1977): 33.

[21]Prescott, "'Formes of Joy and Art': Donne, David, and the Power of Music," *John Donne Journal* 25 (2006): 9.

[22]Donne, *Sermons*, 2:171.

including David, Moses, Miriam, and even John the Baptist, whom Donne praises later in this sermon as "*Vox clamantis, The voice of him that cryes in the wilderness.*"[23]

Apart from the figure of David, Donne's more general treatment of divine singing and music has been another common critical focus, as in Prescott's essay. Frances Malpezzi and Jill Baumgaertner both explore seventeenth-century ideas of harmony, including the neo-Platonic music of the spheres (Christianized by the addition to each of a proprietary angel) and the cosmic harmony (more a mathematical proportion) of Creation as well as the earthly harmony of man-made music.[24] These different senses of "Harmony" (16), and others too, converge in Donne's poem, which celebrates the harmonious sibling relationship of the Sidneys, the harmony of their Psalms (in the ordinary musical sense, in their harmonizing of "highest matter with noblest form" [11], and in the sense in which they are the "Organ" [16]—upon which God, the "Harmony"—plays), and the harmonizing of the divine and human in the Incarnation of Christ (in which God has "tun'd God and Man" [30]). Donne writes of three choirs, "heaven, earth, and sphears" (23), and what he longs for, what he praises the Sidneys for bringing closer, is the harmonizing of these three choirs together. The reunion of humanity with God occurs at an individual's death, but Donne is really looking toward the Last Day when "the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Revelations 21:3, King James Version). Donne longs for that final hour, when "we come th'Extemporall song to sing" (51), "Extemporall" here punning on the senses of "improvised or spontaneous" and (etymologically) "outside of time." But he also hopes that in the meantime the "Sydnean Psalmes" (50) will "Be as our tuning"

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[23]For the singing of Moses and Miriam, see Exodus 15. Linda Phyllis Austern, writing from a musicological perspective, notes that modern scholarship has "all but lost sight of the centrality of musical dialogue to a culture which analogized much of the unseen in musical terms, as does Donne" ("Words on Music: The Case of Early Modern England," *John Donne Journal* 25 [2006]: 208).

[24]Malpezzi, "Christian Poetics in Donne's 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes,'" *Renascence* 33 (1980): 221–228; Baumgaertner, "'Harmony' in Donne's 'La Corona' and 'Upon the Translation of the Psalms,'" *John Donne Journal* 3.2 (1984): 141–156.

(55)—in a moral or spiritual sense—preparing us for death and final resurrection by bringing us back into harmony with God. Donne uses the same metaphor in "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," where he anticipates his death in musical terms:

> Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
> Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
> I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
> And what I must doe then, thinke here before.
> (1–5)

Another complex pun that has attracted some critical attention is Donne's play on the word "translation." Translation is the subject of the poem, in the sense of rendering works of literature from one language into another: Donne declares that the Sidney Psalms are a superior translation to the Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins and their imitators. But Donne also describes the translators as being themselves "translated" by God. The English verb "translate" comes from the Latin *transferre*, meaning to bear or carry across, and its linguistic sense, of rendering one language into another, developed contemporaneously with its more literal one of carrying (the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the *c.* 1300 *Cursor Mundi* as its earliest citation in both senses). One may translate a person from one place to another, especially in the ecclesiastical sense of translating a bishop or minister between jurisdictions. The bodies and relics of saints were spoken of as being translated between graves or resting places. There was, finally, the sense in which the righteous are "translated" from earth to heaven after death. Thomas Heywood, for instance, uses the word in elegies for both Prince Henry (1613) and King James I (1625), and Henry Valentine closes an elegy (for Donne himself) with

> Let this suffice thee, that his Soule which flew
> A pitch of all admir'd, known but of few,
> (Save those of purer mould) is now translated
> From Earth to Heaven, and there Constellated.

> For, if each Priest of God shine as a Starre,
> His Glory is as his Gifts, 'bove others farre.[25]

But Donne's pun is no mere wordplay, since the various senses of translation are his principal concern. Frontain describes the death, or translation, of the Sidneys as the most immediate occasion for "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," assuming the poem was indeed written shortly after 1621; furthermore, their work of translation is what Donne celebrates and champions.[26] In Donne's view, the greatest value of the Sidney Psalms is not that it provides a new-and-improved singing psalter for the English Church, but that it "tunes" its readers better so that they too may finally be "translated" to heaven, to join in with the Sidneys and the rest of the heavenly choir.

Donne's notions of linguistic translation have a complex background, and not just in reference to the translation of secular literature of Greece and Rome that was so central to Renaissance Humanism and the development of vernacular literatures from Italy to France to England.[27] Translation was also at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, and there were spirited debates about the proper methods of Bible translation, the nature of the translated biblical text and its relation to the "original," and (between Protestants and Catholics) about the legitimacy

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[25]Heywood, *A Funerall Elegie, Upon the death of the late most hopefull and illustrious Prince, Henry, Prince of Wales* (London, 1613), n. p., and *A funeral elegie, vpon the much lamented death of the trespuissant and vnmatchable king, King Iames* (London, 1625), n. p. Valentine, "An Elegie upon the incomparable Dr Donne," lines 49–54, in Grierson, ed., 1:375. Frontain notes that this usage may derive from Paul, who writes of God, "who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Colossians 1:13, KJV). It is true that the Wycliffe Bible (1382) is the earliest citation for this sense in the *OED*, but the word is used in many other books than Paul.

[26]Frontain, pp. 103–104. Frontain goes on to suggest that the poem's real "occasion" is "the ongoing reformation of the English church that, after the death of the countess, lost one of its most vigorous leaders, and Donne's offer to share both as poet and preacher in the continuing reform" (p. 104).

[27]Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982). For a broader cultural study of translation in the Renaissance, see Peter Burke and R. Po-Chia Hsia, eds., *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

of vernacular Bibles at all. Of course, these "secular" and "sacred" debates about what modern scholars would call translation theory were entirely intertwined. The scholars translating classical literature and those translating the Bible were often one and the same, and the principles and practices developed in one area were translated to the other. For instance, Lorenzo Valla's exposure of the *Donation of Constantine* as a forgery was a work of humanist scholarship, but it was one of the critical developments in the Reformation critique of the Roman Catholic Church. And while Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum* provided the *textus receptus* of the Greek New Testament that was essential for later Bible translators, it was the work of one of the greatest humanist scholars. And metrical psalms were a means by which vernacular poets developed their craft, as exemplified in English literature by Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey, George Gascoigne, and the Sidneys, as well as a justification for the poetic vocation, since David provided a divinely sanctioned precedent.[28]

At the heart of debates about biblical translation was the relationship between words and the Word, between the Bible as words on a page, written or translated by men, and the Bible as the Word of God, divinely inspired. Was this divine spirit available only in the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, or could it remain or "translate" to the Scriptures in English? (The Latin of the Vulgate was a complicated middle ground for Catholics; it wasn't original, but it was sanctioned by the church, which granted it authority.) Despite his poem weighing in (perhaps privately) on the debate about metrical psalms, however, Donne seems to have been curiously uninterested in the larger matter of Bible translation. As David Norton has shown, Donne used the Vulgate more than any other Bible translation in his sermons. (He also cited texts in Hebrew and Greek.) His use of English versions (Geneva and King James) was "loose and eclectic" and showed no sign of attention to the relative merits or demerits of one translation or another.[29] What this may suggest is that the positive opinion expressed in "Upon the translation of

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[28]Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer, 1535-1601* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Hamlin, *Psalm Culture.*

[29]Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1:242–244. See also Don Cameron Allen, "Dean Donne Sets his Text," *ELH* 10.3 (1943): 208–229.

the Psalmes" is based more on an aesthetic sense of these English Psalms as accomplished poems, rather than on their greater accuracy and faithfulness to the original Hebrew texts.

Donne's poem has additional internal points of interest. The pervasive pattern of doubling and pairing needs more careful exploration, for instance, as in the two Sidneys themselves, mirrored by those other siblings, Moses and Miriam, the two elements of the Psalms (matter and form), created by David's original "double power" (10). There is also further wordplay to puzzle out, as in "cloven tongue" (9) and "cleft . . . spirit" (12), Donne's use of one of those peculiar English words which is a contradiction in itself ("cleave" means both to separate and to join together). The word also has biblical resonance. Donne's phrases invoke the "cloven tongues as of fire" of Pentecost (Acts 2:3, KJV), that inspiration which reunites all separate languages, undoing the linguistic diaspora of the Babel story. It might also recall the Moses story, however, when he strikes water from a cleft in the rock; "cleave" doesn't appear in Exodus 17, where this episode occurs, but in Donne, God "has cleft that spirit" (12) to "shed it" (13) upon the Sidneys, and "shed" can mean both to divide and to pour, as a liquid. Finally, more needs to be said about Donne's remarkable final (non)rhyme:

> . . . may
> These their sweet learned labours, all the way
> Be as our tuning, that, when hence we part,
> We may fall in with them, and sing our part.
> (53–56)

Donne puns on two senses of "part" ("to separate" and a musical line), but the rhyme also represents verbally the perfect, harmonious "tuning" for which the poet longs. What rhyme could be better "tuned" than a homonym?

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Despite the singular occasion of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes"—whether the death of Mary Sidney, Donne's desire for preferment, or the need for a better singing psalter—the poem is not unique in its subject matter. It belongs to a literary sub-genre of lyric

poems that similarly address the nature of Psalms and Psalm translation, the relationship between earthly and heavenly music, and the vocational dilemma of the religious poet. The immediate literary precursor to Donne's poem is one that few of his contemporaries could have known and is obscure today, since it was published only once, in a nineteenth-century volume now long out of print.[30] Francis Davison was a literary entrepreneur, best known for compiling the anthology *The Poetical Rhapsody* (1602), which included poems by both Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke. Davison had a number of other publishing projects in mind that he never completed, including editions of both the Sidney Psalms and the poems of Donne, as well as a collection of metrical psalms by himself, his brother Christopher, and others.[31] Davison's own Psalm translations are quite sophisticated poetry, obviously modeled on the Sidney Psalms, and one of them, Davison's Psalm 137, was actually long thought to be Donne's work, as it was included in Donne's 1633 *Poems*.[32] Davison introduces the manuscript of his Psalms (BL Harleian MS. 6930) with a poem that bears quoting in full, since few readers will know it:

> Come, Urania, heavenly Muse,
> And infuse
> Sacred flame to my invention:
> Sing so loud, that angels may

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[30]Davison, *The Poetical Rhapsody*, ed. N. H. Nicolas, 2 vols. (London: W. Pickering, 1826). Nicolas included the Psalms in an appendix.

[31]Herbert, *Works*, 1:48–49; Stubbs, p. 484, n. 44. Davison's list of "Manuscripts to get" is BL Harleian MS 298, f. 159^{v}.

[32]Grierson, ed., 2:266–267. The argument for Davison's authorship depends on the attribution of the poem to him in the manuscript of his Psalms. See also Hamlin, "'The highest matter in the noblest forme': The Influence of the Sidney Psalms," *Sidney Journal* 23.1-2 (2005): 142–143. Since this article went to press, a compelling argument by Lara Crowley for the re-(re-)attribution of Psalm 137 to Donne has come to my attention, both in conversation and in her "Donne, not Davison: Reconsidering the Authorship of Psalm 137" (forthcoming in *Modern Philology*). I am happy to welcome Donne back into the company of metrical psalms poets, but the reattribution does not affect my argument. I am grateful to the author for sharing her article with me in advance of publication.

Hear thy lay,
Lending to thy note, attention.

Oh! my soul, bear thou a part;
And my heart,
With glad leaps, beat thou the measure!
Powers of soul and body meet,
To make sweet,
Sweet and full this music's pleasure!

But to whom, Muse, shall we sing?
To the King?
Or Prince Charles, our hope and glory?
To any great Maecenas' fame?
Or some Dame,
Proud of beauty transitory?

No, Muse; to Jehovah now,
We do vow
Hymns of praise, psalms of thanksgiving;
By whose only grace and power,
At this hour,
I do breathe among the living!

Hymns, which in the Hebrew tongue,
First were sung,
By Israel's sweet and royal singer;
Whose rich harp the heavenly quire
Did desire
To hear touch'd with his sweet finger:

To which the orbs celestial,
Joining all,
Made all parts so fully sounding,
As no thought, 'till earth we leave,
Can conceive
Aught with pleasure so abounding.

Sacred triple Majesty,
One in Three!
Grant, oh grant me this desire.
When my soul, of body frail

Leaves this gaol,
Let it sing in this blest quire![33]

Not only are Davison's and Donne's poems about Psalms and music, but they use similar images and language to meditate on the subject. They both seem preoccupied with pairing or doubles, for example: the sweetness of Davison's music requires that "Powers of soul and body meet," just as Donne's poem describes the "double power" (10) of David's "highest matter in the noblest form" (11), and the unity of the two Sidneys "by their bloods" (14) and "by thy [God's] spirit" (14). Both poems also include angels listening in heaven, in Davison's case listening to his Muse, Urania, and in Donne's listening to the earthly choir. Choir images abound in both poems, with Davison's "heavenly quire" longing to hear David's "rich harp," and then being joined by "orbs celestial." These correspond to Donne's three choirs: the angelic, heavenly choir which "no man heares" (24) but which listens to "what the church does here" (28); the earthly choir, which needs to be taught by the Sidneys; and the music of the spheres, harmony that "is rather danc'd than sung" (26). Davison longs to "bear . . . a part" in the heavenly choir, and looks forward to death, when his soul may "sing in this blest choir." Donne likewise looks toward death, when we will join in "th'Extemporall song" (51) and "sing our part" (56). The similarities between these two poems are close and too abundant to be coincidental; Donne must have known Davison's poem in manuscript. And the borrowing was from Davison by Donne: Davison died in 1619, and his poem must have been written after the death of Prince Henry, Prince of Wales, in 1612, since he praises Prince Charles as "our hope and glory"; Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" was written after Pembroke's death in 1621. If Davison's Psalm 137 found its way into Donne's papers, where it was discovered by John Marriot, his first editor, then other of Davison's poems may well have been there too. Perhaps Davison sent Donne some of his poems in hopes that he might return the favor and let him publish them. (If so, he was disappointed.)

Both Davison and Donne, however, were likely influenced by an earlier poem on the Psalms, "To the Angell spirit of the most excellent

[33]Davison, "An Introduction to the Translation of the Psalms," in *Poetical Rhapsody*, ed. Nicolas, 2:321–323, checked against BL Harl. MSS. 6930.

Sir Phillip Sidney" by Mary Sidney Herbert herself. Her poem prefaced the Sidney Psalms in the completed manuscript; though the Penshurst Manuscript ("A"), in the hand of John Davies of Hereford, and perhaps a presentation copy for Elizabeth I, is now missing its first leaves, the poem survives in the Tixall Manuscript ("J"), which was transcribed from the Penshurst Manuscript while it was still complete.[34] "To the Angell spirit" is a eulogy to Sidney, but it also serves the same function as Davison's poem: introducing a collection of metrical psalms. Like Davison's and Donne's poems, Pembroke's plays with imagery of doubleness turned into unity. She refers, for instance, to the Sidney Psalms as "this coupled worke, by double int'rest thine [i.e., Sidney's]," as she goes on to explain:

> First rais'de by thy blest hand, and what is mine
> inspir'd by thee, thy secret power imprest.
> So dar'd my Muse with thine it selfe combine,
> as mortall stuffe with that which is divine.[35]

Thus, the Sidney Psalms are double because they are by two authors, but Mary claims also to be inspired by her brother, which makes her own Psalms doubled in a different way, authored by Mary with Philip as Muse. Finally, the analogy to divine Creation, inspiration, or even Incarnation (infusing "mortal stuffe" with the "divine") suggests a doubleness that applies to all the Sidneys' Psalms, and indeed, as Donne suggests, to the original Psalms of David himself.

There are further similarities between Pembroke's poem and those of her imitators. For example, she refers to Sidney's "lightning beams" giving "luster" to her Psalms. This parallels the "Sacred flame" Davison asks his muse to add to "his invention," and may also have inspired Donne's allusion to Pentecost, the "cloven tongue" (9) that "fell upon / These Psalms' first author" (8–9). Each of these three Psalm poets seeks the flash of divine inspiration for a project each feels is dangerously bold. Pembroke asserts that she aimed in her Psalms

> . . . to praise, not to aspire
> To, those high Tons, so in themselves adorn'd,

[34]Herbert, *Works*, 2: 310–317.

[35]Lines 2, 3–6, in Herbert, *Works*, 1:110.

> which Angells sing in their cælestiall Quire,
> and all of tongues with soule and voice admire
> Theise sacred Hymmes thy Kinglie Prophet form'd.
> (10–14)

Pembroke's modesty topos here is directed partly at brother Philip, with his more established literary reputation (enhanced though it was by Pembroke herself), but the anxiety about singing sacred songs is one Pembroke shared with Donne, whose statement to God that "I would but bless thy name, not name thee now" makes an apology similar to Pembroke's claim not to "aspire" but to "praise." All three poems include the angels singing in heavenly choirs, and all three express a desire to join in that song. Philip Sidney has already joined in:

> Thy Angells soule with highest Angells plac't
> There blessed sings enjoying heav'n=delights
> thy Makers praise . . . .
> (59–61)

Pembroke closes, asserting her desire to join her brother and referencing the neo-Platonic cosmology Davison and Donne would later invoke:

> Sorrowe still strives, would mount thy highest sphere
> presuming so just cause might meet thee there,
> Oh happie change! could I so take my leave.
> (89–91)

Singing Psalms on earth is all mortal poets can (and should) do, but such singing is a pale imitation of the choir of heavenly spheres, angels, and the elect departed.

There are solid internal arguments, then, for a literary-genealogical relationship between Pembroke's "To the Angell spirit," Davison's "An Introduction to the Translation of the Psalms," and Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes." Donne's possible access to Davison's manuscripts has been mentioned, but both Davison and Donne certainly knew the Sidney Psalms (the one hoping to publish them, the other hoping they would be published), and it seems reasonable that they also read Pembroke's introductory poem. The chain does not end with Donne, however. Another major poet interested in Psalms wrote a poem

on earthly and heavenly music that is self-consciously indebted to Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" and perhaps to the Sidney Psalms more generally.

John Milton's "At a Solemn Music" is, like Donne's, an occasional poem, this time, as the title seems to suggest, for some unspecified concert of (presumably) sacred music. Milton begins with an invocation that calls for a pair of siblings to unite in song:

> Blest pair of sirens, pledges of heaven's joy,
> Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice, and Verse,
> Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power employ
> Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce . . . .
> (1–4)[36]

The doubling of musical agents here recalls all three previous Psalm poems. Milton's "mixed power" is a further elaboration of David's "double power," described by Donne. (In Donne, David's power combined "the highest matter in the noblest forme" [11], or what might flatly be called form and content, while in Milton it is "Voice, and Verse," or, as this is usually interpreted, music and poetry.) Milton's poem is also entirely focused on the relationship between earthly music, the music of the spheres, and the heavenly harmony, the three choirs that so appealed to Donne. Milton characteristically ups the stakes to a "thousand choirs," but what they sing is "Hymns devout and holy psalms" (12, 15). Unlike Donne, whose angels listen to earthly singing, Milton has humans answering, however imperfectly, heaven's "melodious noise" (18; in the seventeenth century, "noise" could be pleasant or melodious). The problem for the Milton is that the cosmic harmony has been broken ("disproportioned") by original sin. As in Donne, Pembroke, and Davison, musical imagery describes not simply human music, but represents greater concerns: the relationship between God and humanity and the harmony of Creation.

Donne's hope was that the Sidney Psalms might provide a renewal of sacred song, or at least model a way toward it. He expresses the need to "keep in tune" (hoping that the Sidneys would "Be as our tuning" [55]),

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[36]Milton, "At a Solemn Music," in *Complete Shorter Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. John Carey (Harlow, Essex: Longmans, 1997), pp. 168–170. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations to this and other Milton poems are from this edition.

and he longs to "fall in with them, and sing our part" (56). Like Donne, Milton feels the need for "musical" reform and longs to join in the heavenly singing:

> O may we soon again renew that song,
> And keep in tune with heaven, till God ere long
> To his celestial consort us unite,
> To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.[37]
> (25–28)

Milton so longed to be in the choir, in fact, that his desires got ahead of him. In an early draft of the poem, the final line reads, "To live and sing with him in endlesse morne of light."[38] Singing alongside God, who is normally conceived not as a member of the choir but as its audience and the object of its praise, seems to have struck even the young Milton as brash, so he changed the line to keep the living and singing separate. But he remained committed to a project he shared with the Sidneys, Donne, and other religious poets—the praise of God in verse, the reform of poetry using the divinely-inspired model of the Psalms, and (ideally) the preparation of fallen humanity, through properly "tuned" devotional poetry, for final judgment:

> Prayer, since the Fall, must needs be a consciously contrived process, a work, in fact, of poetic art; it cannot be automatic and spontaneous as once it was before "disproportioned sin/ Jarr'd against natures chime." "That song" is perfect prayer, possible, in an imperfect world, only through the act of liturgical-poetical-musical devotion.[39]

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[37]That Milton had Donne's poem in his ear is further suggested by lines from *Comus* (1634). The Lady sings her wish that Echo, "sweetest queen of parley, daughter of the sphere," should "be translated to the skies, / And give resounding grace to all heaven's harmonies" (240–242).

[38]Trinity College Manuscript, transcribed and reproduced in photographic facsimile in *John Milton's Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Harris Francis Fletcher, 4 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1943), 1:392–393.

[39]John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500-1700* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961; repr. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1993), p. 329.

All that Donne might have added to this summation by John Hollander is that "the whole Book of Psalms is called *Sepher Tehillim*, that is, *Liber Laudationum*, The Book of Praise, yet this Psalme [90], and all that follow to the hundredth Psalme, and divers others besides these . . . are called Prayers; The Book is Praise, the Parts are Prayer. The name changes not the nature; Prayer and Praise is the same thing."[40] Thus, prayer is praise, the Psalms are praises, therefore Prayer = Psalms.

Milton obviously knew Donne's poem, which was easily available in print. "At a Solemn Music" was written some time between 1631 and 1637, but the allusions to and echoes from "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" suggests a date after the 1635 *Poems* of Donne. Milton also knew the Sidney Psalms.[41] Interestingly, Milton may himself have been involved later in life in efforts to (once again) reform the English Psalter. He translated two sets of metrical psalms, at least one of which (Psalms 80–88), it has been suggested, was intended as a potential replacement to Sternhold and Hopkins.[42] Given his lifelong interest in the Psalms, it is not surprising that Milton was drawn to the Sidney Psalms and to Donne's poem in their praise.

Notably, Milton did not read "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" as a simple occasional poem, but as a lyric exploration of the "harmony" between God and man, more discordant since the fall, yet capable of renewal or reformation. Importantly, this reformation could be achieved through music, or religious poetry in the spirit and mode of the Psalms of David (and his descendants the Sidneys). Milton joined in this tradition, with his verse translations of Psalms 1–8; moreover, much more of his poetry is steeped in the Psalms: his early translations of Psalms 114 and 136, his later Greek version of 114, and his two Psalms

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[40]Donne, Sermon preached at St. Paul's on Psalm 90:14, *Sermons*, 5:270. Potter and Simpson suggest a date between November 1621 and the end of 1622 (5:23), in other words, at roughly the same time as "Upon the translation of the Psalmes."

[41]Hamlin, "'The highest matter,'" pp. 133–157.

[42]David Masson, *The Life of John Milton*, 5 vols. (London, 1877), 1:243, cited in Carey, ed., *Shorter Poems*, p. 309. See also Margaret Boddy, "Milton's Translations of Psalms 80–88," *Modern Philology* 64.1 (1966): 1–9.

sequences (80–88 and 1–8), the "Nativity Ode," and *Paradise Lost*.[43] Donne was less Psalm-obsessed than Milton, and the two poets were far apart theologically, but in his religious verse Donne frequently shared Milton's concern with defining the proper mode of sacred poetry, and they shared the sense that in this respect, the Sidneys had "Both told us what, and taught us how to do."

* * * *

Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" should be read more often not just by those interested in the Sidney Psalter or the history of metrical psalms. The poem shares the verbal complexity and intellectual sophistication of Donne's better known poems, and it offers a subtle exploration of aspects of religious poetry, including the importance of biblical models and the problems of translation. It also addresses large concerns about the liturgy and the reformation of the Church, the place of poetry in that reformation, and the theology of sin and salvation. Finally, reading "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" illuminates Milton's "At a Solemn Music," just as reading Milton's poem illuminates the Donne poem that clearly inspired it. And both Donne and Milton reach back to earlier if lesser known poems in the genre, Davison's "Introduction to the Translation of the Psalms" and Pembroke's "To the Angell Spirit." However occasional Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" may be, it transcends its occasion in its "highest matter," its "noblest form," and its contribution to a small but significant tradition of English poetry.

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[43]See Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Milton's Epics and the Book of Psalms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), as well as Hamlin, *Psalm Culture*, pp. 139–144, 213–215, 238–240.