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Donne's "Blest Hermaphrodite" and Psalms "More Harsh"

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Donne's "To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders" and "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sidney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister" are occasional poems, apparently needing little comment. Yet both have allusions perhaps not fully understood by commentators.

In "To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders," for instance, Donne praises the Cambridge graduate Edward Tilman for becoming a priest, even though the calling would bring little worldly gain. Donne closes his congratulations with this encomium:

> And so the heavens which beget all things here,
> And th'earth our mother things doth beare,
> Both these in thee, are in thy Calling knit,
> And make thee now a blest Hermaphrodite. (51-54)

Helen Gardner noted that "hermaphrodite" was used figuratively in Donne's day for any striking conjunction of opposites, as in the line "Of study'and play made strange Hermaphrodits" from his "Epithalamium at Lincoln's Inn."[1] This is true but does not grasp

[1]John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 102. Citations of Donne's poems are to this text.

Donne's point. He is hardly thinking of hermaphrodites as freaks of nature (Tilman would not be flattered by that). Still less is he referring to hermaphrodites in classical erotic tradition (as with Spenser's statue "of white marble wrought" decorating a costly Roman bath).[2] Donne seems rather to be comparing Tilman to Adam, whom many of Donne's contemporaries took as the supreme "blest Hermaphrodite."

The concordance of Alexander Cruden (1701-70), for example, under its entry for "woman" points out that "Some writers have thought, that Adam was created of both sexes." Since God created man male and female, Cruden explains, "It is therefore affirmed that man was already formed male and female before Eve was created. Others think that the bodies of Adam and Eve were created even from the sixth day, but joined and fastened sidewise to each other; and that afterwards God sent a deep sleep on Adam, and then separated the *woman* from him."[3] The idea's origins are indicated by Sir Thomas Browne. Discussing hares, he notes that Plato and some rabbis thought the first man a hermaphrodite, as did "Marcus Leo [Judah Abravanel, *c.* 1460-before 1535, author of *Dialoghi dell'amore*] the learned Jew," as indicated by the text "male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27, 5:2).[4]

Indeed, scriptural language is appropriately central in Donne's poem. Tilman has put his hand to the plough (Luke 9:62); like an angel out of a cloud (Revelation 10:1), so will he preach; the image of heaven begetting and earth conceiving reflects that of Adam's

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[2]C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 344; E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 113.

[3]Alexander Cruden, *A Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testament* (London, n.d.), pp. 562-3.

[4]*The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 2nd edition (London, 1964), 2: 215; cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), ii, col. 230, and *Sir Thomas Browne's Pseudodoxia epidemica*, ed. R.H.A. Robbins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

creating (Genesis 2:7). This last reference to life made by alliance of heaven and earth would lead naturally to an allusion to Adam. Hence it seems the "blest Hermaphrodite" of the poem's last line is a striking compliment to Tilman. Browne and Cruden again prove instructive. Browne observes that some affirm Adam was "the wisest of all men" (Keynes, ii, 18). Cruden's entry for "man" describes Adam as originally "a very noble and exalted creature," with powers and operations of mind that were "extensive, capacious, and perfect" (Cruden 298). Before the Fall and before even the creation of Eve, "Blest hermaphrodite" would hence be an antonomasia for Adam, happy and without sin. So, Donne seemingly implies, Tilman in his new state will have the blessings and powerful understanding of Adam new-made. Thus the wit of the poem's concluding image of a "blest Hermaphrodite" is enhanced when we recognize it as a reference to Adam's conjoining of opposites. As another Adam in his earliest existence, Tilman is blessed, sinless, and most exalted of men—and women.

In "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sidney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister," Donne contrasts the achievement of the Sidneys to the feeble translations used by the Church of England:

> As I can scarce call that reform'd untill
> This be reform'd; Would a Whole State present
> A lesser gift than some one man hath sent?
> And shall our Church, unto our Spouse and King
> More hoarse, more harsh than any other, sing? (40-44)

Donne was not alone in criticizing earlier English translations.[5] Yet the last two lines here are obscure. Gardner thought they might refer to the excellent French version of the Psalms by Clément

[5]Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. G.T. Shepherd (London: T. Nelson, 1965), 152-3; Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer 1535-1601* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.

Marot (d. 1544) and "possibly also the richness in hymnody of the Lutheran Churches" (Gardner, p. 103). Perhaps. Yet Marot's Calvinist version (sung to this day by French-speaking Protestants) might not commend itself to an Anglican like Donne, and Lutheran hymns are not the same as metrical psalms. Donne may thus refer to an Anglican version of the Psalms published at the time he wrote this poem (after the Countess of Pembroke's death on 25 September 1621): *Llyfr y Psalmau Wedi eu cyfieithu, a'i cyfansoddi ar fesur cerdd, yn Gymraeg* ("The Book of Psalms translated and put into metrical form, in Welsh"). This famous version, the work of Edmund Prys (1544-1623), Archdeacon of Merioneth, has been praised ever since its appearance in 1621. It was not the first Welsh metrical translation of the Psalms,[6] but it was the first to put them into simple stanzas to be sung by congregations, so that some of its versions (which, for all their simplicity, have "poetic dignity," "muscular strength," and "sweetness to ear and heart") figure even now in Welsh hymn-books.[7] The success of the translation (a remarkable achievement for a man of nearly 80) was "immediate, immense, and enduring"; no fewer than ninety-nine editions appeared between 1621 and 1865.[8]

Prys's translation of the Psalms (*STC* 2745) was published at London in one volume with an edition of *Llyfr Gweddi Cyffredin* (*STC* 16438), the Welsh Book of Common Prayer. Yet it had a different printer, Thomas Purfoot II, when the Prayer Book was produced by the king's printers, Bonham Norton and John Bill. It

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[6]A.C. Breeze, "Drake's Last Voyage and William Midleton's *Psalmae* of 1603," *National Library of Wales Journal* 32 (2001-3): 57-9.

[7]Thomas Parry, *A History of Welsh Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 188, 190; cf. Philip Jenkins, *A History of Modern Wales* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 108.

[8]Glanmor Williams, *The Welsh and their Religion* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 164-5, and his *Wales and the Reformation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 387.

had a separate title-page, as a National Library of Wales pamphlet makes clear (it also notes that Prys's work was the first Welsh printed book with music).[9] It might well have been known to Donne, for he had various contacts with Wales. Some think him related to the Dwns of Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire; he was certainly friendly with Lord Herbert of Cherbury (a Welsh-speaker, as his autobiography shows), and in 1613 visited the Herberts at Montgomery Castle, Powys. But the Welsh Book of Common Prayer of 1621 would in any case concern Anglican authorities in London. Donne might therefore have known of the psalms published with it, heard of their excellence from Welsh friends, and perhaps even seen their music. If so, this would explain his "And shall our Church, unto our Spouse and King / More hoarse, more harsh than any other, sing?" If he knew of Prys's work, Donne might well ask why the Church of England had no worthy metrical version of the Psalms, when the Church of Wales did.

Prys's version thus seems to explain Donne's allusion in ways that Marot's verses and Luther's hymns do not. As an Anglican work it was closer to Donne's heart than Marot's Calvinistic version, and appeared in London (where Donne lived) in 1621, the year the Countess of Pembroke's death prompted his poem. And it is important to recall that in Donne's day the Welsh language was more important than it is now. Wales had a population of perhaps 340,000 to England's 4,700,000, which gives a ratio of fourteen speakers of English to one of Welsh.[10] (The figure today is about 105:1.) So Welsh religious books had a vital pastoral aspect (most Welsh-speakers were monoglots), but also a political one (James I's government was perturbed by the success of Catholic missions in

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[9]*The Fourth Centenary of the Welsh New Testament* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Press, 1967), pp. 16-17 and plate 6.

[10]E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 575; Jenkins, 17.

Wales).[11] As part of government policy, the 1621 Welsh prayer book and psalms would be a matter of concern for a senior Anglican cleric like Donne.

As regards *Llyfr y Psalmau*, Donne's reference to "any other" Church's sweet singing seems more than a coincidence. If so, it shows an unusual influence of Welsh poetry on English poetry, as well as indicating Donne's interest in books and language, and perhaps also his official contacts as a Church of England priest.

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[11]Jenkins, 111-16; A.C. Breeze, "St. Winifred of Wales and *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Notes and Queries*, 243 (1998): 33-4.