
Annie Sutherland. *English Psalms in the Middle Ages, 1300–1450.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, xvi + 304 pp., 8 illustr., £ 60.00.

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As frequently pointed out by earlier scholarship, the centrality of the psalms to the liturgical and devotional practice of the Middle Ages can hardly be over-emphasized. The voice of the psalmist, whose modes of utterance range from anguished cries for divine help to joyful praise of the creator's glory, could function as a template for a multitude of official and private forms of religious expression, and lent itself to a large variety of uses, liturgical and quasi-liturgical, devotional and catechetical. Forming the groundwork of the Office in the medieval church, recitation of the psalms was a spiritual exercise which appealed not only to the religious but also to a lay audience, which in turn led to a need to translate the psalms into the vernacular for a non-Latinate readership.

Annie Sutherland's recent study on the English psalms is an important step towards a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the religious climate of the later Middle Ages and the texts to which it gave rise. Her work is informed by an understanding of the relationship between the Latin liturgy and English vernacular devotional culture not as one of repressive hierarchy and outright competition but rather of Latin religious texts as a powerful source inspiring vernacular creation and innovation. Based on this premise, her study presents an in-depth examination of English vernacular translations of the psalms and the manuscripts in which they are contained, including not only complete psalters but also translations of individual psalms and smaller groups of texts. Wider questions such as medieval theories of translation as well as matters such as audience, context, and possible uses of these translations are also addressed, and come together in a well-balanced and thorough piece of scholarship.

Chapter One ("Psalm Dissemination") begins by investigating the evidential basis of ownership and circulation of the psalms. Extant wills and testaments give an indication of who owned and read these texts in late medieval England. In spite of the well-known limits of using the documentary evidence of wills to delineate a clear picture of the literary possessions of the reading population, the information to be gained from them is nonetheless substantial, since psalters "are among the most commonly bequeathed books of the late Middle Ages" (10). Here as elsewhere in the book, Sutherland rightly rejects a simplistic binary opposition of categories such as the liturgical vs. the personal, insisting that in the cultural landscape of the late Middle Ages a clear boundary between the two cannot be drawn. A general overview of palpable tendencies and trends regarding the ownership of volumes containing vernacular psalms is followed by a more detailed investigation of the characteristics of the most frequent text types which feature translations of the psalms, namely primers (i.e. volumes containing liturgical and devotional material for use in private contexts), complete psalters, as well as verse and prose paraphrases, exploring the various devotional and catechetical contexts in which they could be put to use. A connection is drawn between the specific features of these texts and possible general anxieties regarding the translation of biblical texts into the vernacular.

The second chapter ("Theorizing Translation") engages with the theoretical framework on which contemporary medieval practices of translation from Latin into English were based. Questions of authority and linguistic prestige must have been particularly contentious when it came to translating biblical texts, which were perceived as authoritative and sacred due to divine inspiration. The importance of such a theoretical underpinning is made abundantly clear, since underlying concepts regarding the role of the translator and the authority of the source text would have influenced the act of translation and must be discernible, to

varying degrees, in the translated texts themselves. Thus, closely literal or more idiomatic modes of translation which we can encounter in the Middle English psalms may be driven by different theoretical views and point to a conscious choice on the part of the translator to replicate or appropriate the source in one way or another. Although short, this chapter is characterized by acute distinctions between different modes of translation, providing a well-grounded context for the subsequent two chapters.

The detailed discussion of translation strategies in the following chapters, “The Practice of Translation: Complete Psalters” and “Abbreviated and Paraphrased Psalters”, arises naturally out of the preceding theoretical thoughts and presents an excellent textual analysis of various extant psalm translations, often contained in a substantial number of manuscripts. The discussion includes complete psalters such as the northern *Metrical Psalter*, the Midland *Prose Psalter*, and more widely circulated texts such as Richard Rolle’s *English Psalter*, and translations by the Wycliffites. In addition, it also deals extensively with selections of psalms contained in primers and paraphrases (e.g. by Richard Maidstone and Thomas Brampton) and commentaries (Walter Hilton, Eleanor Hull). The inclusion of psalm commentaries here is entirely justified and necessary, since clear distinctions between translation and commentary are often impossible to make – “[t]ranslation and commentary are [...] only two sides of the same coin” (110). In these two chapters, a skilful close analysis and comparison of the language and style of different translations and the way in which they interact with their Latin source, supplemented by a wealth of information in the footnotes, is paired with considerations as to the functions of these translations, which can range from easy accessibility for a lay audience or catechetical intentions to a literary enjoyment of poetic language. As concerns the interconnections and dependencies between individual translations, Sutherland challenges Henry Hargreaves’s earlier claim¹ that medieval English psalm translations form a straightforward “chain” (1956: 326) of descent and derivation, arguing instead that the situation is much more complex, with the psalms forming a vibrant “nexus of connections in which texts have the freedom to respond to each other critically as well as imitatively” (87). It is one of the particular strengths of this publication to reinforce such re-evaluations of earlier research by an abundance of insights into the relation of mutual indebtedness which exists between the translations, supported by extensive quotations and examples from the manuscripts.

¹ Henry Hargreaves. 1956. “The Vocabulary of the Surtees Psalter”. *Modern Language Quarterly* 17: 326–339.

The fifth chapter (“Reading the English Psalms”) takes a broader view and, on the basis of the close reading of the preceding chapters, examines the context in which the English psalms were read and interpreted by their contemporary audience(s). Questions of biblical exegesis and typology are also addressed here. Sutherland succeeds in demonstrating how the vernacular psalms could be adapted to a dual function in the private and public spaces, and how the act of reading the psalms could be seen as conducive to devotion and contemplation on the one hand and as a guide to the active living out of religious ideals on the other.

In Chapter Six (“The English Psalms?”), this extensive study concludes with an exploration of codicological and palaeographical aspects, considering the English psalms in their material context. More specifically, this chapter examines how the relationship between Latin and the vernacular is presented visually on the page. Again, Sutherland questions dualistic interpretations which insist on a hierarchical opposition of Latin and the vernacular, claiming that the relationship between the two languages is “ambiguous and shifting” (232) and that vernacular voices “both assert an identity independent of their Latin source and ask to be heard in dialogue with that source” (7). This is amply demonstrated by a wealth of detail from the material evidence, and it is only to be regretted that the book does not include more than just eight photographs of individual manuscript pages to illustrate this. Overall, the reader cannot help but wonder whether it would not have made for a more concise line of argument if the book had moved from the material context to the textual analysis instead of the reverse order. Such a procedure would certainly have done away with some seemingly displaced footnotes on codicological matters in the third and fourth chapter, which anticipate the more detailed discussion which follows in the final chapter. Similarly, in that case it would not have been necessary to discuss details of translation in the chapter dealing with the material context (e.g. 247–248). However, in the end the strategy does pay off well, making for a smooth, elegant ending which can seamlessly move on to the final summary in the “Concluding Thoughts”.

The study is rounded off with an appendix containing useful lists of extant manuscripts of English psalms and an extensive bibliography. The index at the end of the volume is rather short and does not contain, for instance, the names of testators mentioned in the first chapter.

Overall, Annie Sutherland’s book provides an exceptionally lucid and profound analysis of the Middle English psalms, which combines a detailed close reading of the texts with a wide-ranging and convincing consideration of contextual questions. There are a few minor inconsistencies in terms of formatting and presentation – for instance, Nicholas of Lyre’s comment in the *Postilla Litteralis* is only quoted in its Modern English translation (200), without the original, while in other places quotations from Latin texts do include the Latin source alongside the

translation (e.g. 274). However, such details are negligible in face of the overwhelming evidence of thorough scholarship and thoughtful engagement with the Middle English texts and contexts, especially in hitherto underexplored areas of research like the medieval primers. This work is certain to become an important foundation for all future research on English psalm translations and the devotional culture of the late Middle Ages.