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Psalm Reception History Assignment, For Early British Literature Survey or Studies in Renaissance Literature courses

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Daniel Knapper
 Psalm Reception History Assignment
 For Early British Literature Survey or Studies in Renaissance Literature courses

This assignment involves a hands-on activity in a special collections library at the undergraduate level. The assignment is meant to culminate lessons on the rise of print culture and its effects on literary writing and reading in the Renaissance/Reformation period, particularly in relation to the cultural phenomenon of Psalm-based lyric adaptation. The goal of the assignment is to introduce students to 1) the history of biblical translation, paraphrase, and interpretation in the period, 2) the impact of this history on contemporary literary culture, and 3) the connections between this history and the history of the book. It also provides students the opportunity to learn the codes of conduct in a rare books library and to practice handling rare materials.

Ideally, the class would have access to a special collections library, where they could meet for part 2 of the assignment, and they would also have access to Psalm-related rare books representing a variety of material, textual, and paratextual features, including different physical sizes and formats, illustrations, bindings, prefaces, marginalia, indices, and so on. The rare books listed below are drawn from the special collections of the H. Henry Meeter Center, hosted by my teaching institution, Calvin University. The assignment prompt follows.

For this assignment, you will choose a biblical Psalm and develop a history of its interpretation and literary adaptation during the Reformation. The assignment involves hands-on research in the H. Henry Meeter Center, which holds a variety of rare books related to Psalm translation, paraphrase, and interpretation in the period. By completing this assignment, you will strengthen your understanding of the rich and complex history of biblical translation, paraphrase, and interpretation in the period. You will recognize the impact of this history on contemporary British literary writing. You will understand how the book as a technology and material form shaped and enriched this history. Finally, you will learn the codes of conduct in a rare books library, practice handling rare materials, and practice using research database resources like EEBO.

The assignment has three parts:

1. Establish and analyze the text (2 pages)

Choose a biblical Psalm and transcribe it according to the 1611 Authorized “King James” Version.

Offer a literary reading of the Psalm’s language, meanings, and effects. How does it address God? Is it an expression of thanksgiving, or curse, or lament, or repentance, or something else? What are its most interesting/significant words, phrases, images, metaphors, etc., and why? Do any meaningful patterns emerge? How would you characterize the speaker of the Psalm? What does the Psalm reveal about the self, other people, the world, and/or God? And what rhetorical effect does it have on you? Does it inspire, or depress, or surprise, or confuse you?

2. Compare other early modern versions and interpretations (2 pages)

This part of the assignment begins during our class visit to the Meeter Center, where various rare books on the Psalms will be displayed for hands-on work. *Bring a means of transcription (a notebook or computer) or a means of photography (smartphone, etc.).*

Transcribe another version of the Psalm from the period, then analyze differences in translation, presentation, and interpretation. Ask yourself: are there any textual variations (different words or phrases?) How does commentary shape your understanding and response to the Psalm? What about paratextual material (consider prefaces, arguments, marginal glosses, headers, etc.)? Are there any images, and if so, what are their effects? What do the material features of the book—its size, format, type, binding, paper quality—reveal about the way it was, or was supposed to be, used by readers (is this version meant for personal devotion, theological study, or as a preaching aid)?

Several early works on the Psalms will be available for consultation:

The Bible that is, The Holy Scriptures contained in the Old & New Testament

London, 1607.

An early edition of the “Geneva Bible,” the most popular English translation of the Bible in the 16th century, produced by English exiles in Calvin’s Geneva and first published in 1560. An early study Bible, used by Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Sidney. Includes influential marginal glosses on the “hard places,” often with political overtones.

The Psalmes of Dauid, trvly opened and explaned by paraphrasis according to the right sense of euerie Psalme. With large and ample arguments before euerie Psalme, declaring the true vse thereof ; to the which is added a brief table, shewing wherevnto euerie Psalm is particularly to be applied

London, 1581.

English translation of *Psalmorum Davidis et aliorum prophetarum libri quinque*, Theodor de Beza's influential paraphrases and annotations on the Psalms. Beza was Calvin’s successor as lead pastor of the church at Geneva. The engraving of King David before God (symbolized by the Hebrew tetragrammaton) also occurs in the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter of 1595, but encircled with a different verse from the Psalms.

Two and twentie sermons of Maister Iohn Calvin In which sermons is most religiously handled, the hundredth and nineteenth Psalme of David, by eight verses aparte according to the Hebrew alphabet

Imprinted at London at the Three Cranes in the Vintree by Thomas Dawson, for Iohn Harison and Thomas Man, 1580. Translator's dedication signed : Tho[mas] Stocker.

The Psalms of Dauid and others vvith M. Iohn Caluins commentaries

Imprinted at London: by Thomas East and Henry Middelton: for Lucas Harison, and George Byshop, 1571.

English translation of John Calvin's *In librum Psalmorum Iohannis Caluini commentarius*. Includes all of the Psalms with Calvin's commentary, translated by Arthur Golding, prominent translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, read by Shakespeare.

3. Compare an early literary adaptation of the Psalm (2 pages)

This part of the assignment involves online research through Early English Books Online (EEBO), a searchable database of books printed in England from 1500-1700. Books are presented as PDF scans, often with HTML transcription included.

Transcribe a literary adaptation of the Psalm from the period. Then ask yourself: what is the verse and meter of the Psalm, and how does versification and metrification change its meanings and effects? What are significant words, phrases, images, metaphors, and how do these reshape my understanding and response to the Psalm? Are there any other interesting textual or paratextual features that you can see on EEBO? How does reading the Psalm on EEBO affect the experience of it? What does comparison of these versions of the Psalm reveal about its meanings?

Possible English metrical Psalms to consult:

Thomas Wyatt, *Certayne psalmes* (1549) (the Penitential Psalms)

Robert Crowley, *The Psalter of Dauid newly translated into Englysh metre* (1549)

Sternhold and Hopkins, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* (1562)

George Wither, *The Psalms of David Translated into Lyrick-Verse* (1632)