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Main content

Article Preview :

They shew us llanders our joy, our King, They tell us why, and teach us how to sing. (1)

As John Donne recognized nearly four hundred years ago, the psalm paraphrases by Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, are an extraordinary poetic achievement. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it seems remarkable that they remained in such relative obscurity for so much of the time between Donne's and our own. Fortunately, the last twenty years have in many ways made up for earlier neglect, and a combination of bibliographic diligence, interest in the religious culture of the long Reformation, and feminist scholarship has been brought to bear on the Sidney-Pembroke psalms, with the result that they seem now to be not only canonical but counted among the major works of English Renaissance poetry. The terms of Donne's praise for the Sidneian psalms, however, also raise a question that remains relatively controversial--or at least unsettled--in modern discussions: what kinds of devotional practice do these particular metrical psalms enable? To put it another way, how do we sing the Sidney Psalter?

This question has implications for not only the Sidneys' work, but for our understanding of how early modern audiences experienced metrical psalmody in general. Partly as a result of scholarship on the Sidney-Pembroke psalms, indeed, metrical psalmody itself has become far more visible in literary studies. The Sidney Psalter, though, is not just artistically superior to most English psalm paraphrases written both before and after, but different in kind. This difference is especially marked for sixteenth-century psalmody. Moreover, although the Sidney Psalter significantly affected seventeenth-century psalm versification, Stuart readers still tended to treat it as more generically like its Tudor predecessors than it actually was. Sidney and especially Pembroke put into thorough practice theories of psalmody as poetry that other authors did not, but in doing so separated their work from the mainstream use of complete metrical psalters: public congregational singing. This essay is an attempt to reframe our view of the Sidneian psalms in relation to the tradition in which they play such an important but peculiar part.

Before we can begin to place the Sidney Psalter with respect to other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century metrical psalmody, we need to map out that literary terrain. Given the richness and variety of psalm paraphrase in the early modern period, there are a number of ways to do this; some obvious kinds of distinctions include form, source, and degree of literalism. For our purposes, though, I'd like to explore the uses to which the kinds of metrical models that Sidney and Pembroke would have known were put, and then, as briefly as possible, look at the ways that psalms in these categories changed during the seventeenth century. As dryly actuarial as this excursus may seem, it sheds considerable light on the oddity of the Sidney Psalter and the critical disagreements that arise largely from this historical uniqueness.

The first and most visible category is the liturgical or, in England,...

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