

MAGDALENA CHARZYŃSKA-WÓJCIK

Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II*

Perfectly Imperfect — the Scottish Psalter of 1564

Abstract

The return to the original languages of the Bible was one of the key tenets of the Protestant reform and the embodiment of the Renaissance cry *ad fontes*. The circumvention of the Septuagint and the Vulgate was, therefore, not necessarily so much an outright expression of hostility towards Rome as an articulation of a desire for fidelity to the text; hence the emergence of a plethora of new Latin translations of the original Hebrew Psalter. The Scottish metrical Psalter of 1564, which is going to be the focus of this paper, however, was not based on the Hebrew source but either on its fresh Latin renditions or, most frequently, on German and French versifications. In addition to that, the incipient text was adapted to the pre-set tunes associated with individual Psalms. Consequently, the requirements of rhythm and rhyme — both these obtaining in English and those which had influenced the German and French versified Psalms — were prioritised over the fidelity of the rendition. In spite of that, the Scottish Kirk accorded it the status of the liturgical text, and members of the Congregation immediately embraced it, taking the psalms from the churches to their homes and meeting places, so psalm singing became a ubiquitous activity. At the same time, the text of the Scottish Psalter was felt to be imperfect and several attempts at improving it were undertaken, but the ministers demurred. The paper sets out to explain the popularity the Scottish Psalter enjoyed despite its manifold imperfections.

* Katedra Historii Języka Angielskiego i Translatoryki, Instytut Filologii Angielskiej
Wydziału Nauk Humanistycznych KUL
al. Raławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin
e-mail: mcwojcik@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

The Psalter holds primacy among Christian books in several ways¹. It is always mentioned in the context of superlatives, as the most frequently produced book of the Bible by the Hellenistic scribes (Schaper 2014: 173), in medieval scriptoria and by the early printing houses. It is also the first individual book of the Bible to appear in print (1477), the first book to be printed in the West in an oriental language other than Hebrew (Austern, McBride and Orvis 2011: 6), the first book *ever* to be printed in *some* languages (2011: 6), and the first book to be published in the English colonies (2011: 2). It is the only text used in the public services of every historic Christian Church — Greek, Roman, German, Swiss, Scottish, and English (Dyke 1913: 4); one of the Biblical books most frequently commented on (Brown 2014: 7 [quot. too:] Daley 2003)². the most treasured item of possession next to the whole Bible; frequently the only book possessed in a household; the book that has survived in larger numbers than any other liturgical books (Solopova 2013: 89), etc. The Psalter is also the most richly decorated book of the Bible, the most frequently translated book of the Bible (Brown 2014: 1) and “the largest concentration of poetry within the Bible” (Hawkins 2014: 99).

From a less data-oriented perspective, the Psalter has often been described as “the most influential biblical book of the early modern period (Austern, McBride and Orvis 2011: 33). Graham (2016: 43) says that “[i]t would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the Psalms and psalm translation to the Reformation”. The same sentiment is expressed in Zim (1987: ix): “[i]t is scarcely possible to over-estimate the significance which these texts (...) had on innumerable lives” — a view which found frequent expression among contemporaries (cf. Luther’s conviction expressed in his *Preface to the Psalter* that the Psalter “was a little Bible”).

¹ This it is not an exclusively Christian perspective. Psalms were the most numerous or the second most numerous group of manuscripts among the scrolls found in the Judaean desert (cf. Flint 2013: 11; 2014: 229 for slightly differing numbers of the manuscripts).

² “In 1723 a painful scholar counted six hundred and thirty commentaries upon the Psalms. Since that time many more have been added” (Dyke 1913: v).

Moreover, the Book of Psalms is viewed as the most complex book of the Bible (Brown 2014: 1) and has been claimed to describe “a full gamut of human emotions” (Strawn 2014: 404), to have addressed “the anthropological question concerning what it means to be human (...) more profoundly than any other biblical book” (Creach 2014: 529). It has been described as “a treasury of memorable, lyrical expression, which has been especially valued as a mirror of mankind’s spiritual experience” and appreciated for its “intrinsic affective appeal” (Zim 1987: 1). The “richness of the Psalms” (Barton 2013: 259) — “our greatest, lyric sequence” (Prescott 2011: 236), “a deep, multifaceted, and fruitful resource” (Long 2014: 557) — is beautifully captured in the words of St. Ambrose “What is more pleasing than a Psalm?”³

Admittedly, the Psalms are a grand and timeless production — an all-time favourite, but some of their actual manifestations do not seem to match the above description very well. What I mean in particular is the Scottish Psalter of 1564. Its literary quality leaves much to be desired, and so do its theological soundness and musical qualities. And yet, the moment metrical Psalms emerged — imperfect as they originally might have been — they found a place in the hearts of the Scottish congregation and they have held this position ever since.

The origins of the Scottish Psalter of 1564 are well documented in the rich literature on the topic (cf. for example Patrick 1949/1950; Quitslund 2008; Duguid 2014; an overview is also offered in my earlier publication from 2016), so there is no need to retell the story. I will therefore proceed immediately to the matter at hand. In particular, I will start with an overview of metrical Psalmody as a cultural phenomenon, starting with it being an essentially musical production (Section 2) and then move on to introducing Psalms as poetry (Section 3). I will subsequently move on to an analysis of the quality of the text as rhyming metre (Section 4), where I will discuss the use of rhyme as a mnemonic aid (Section 4.1), the status of rhyming verse among contemporaries (Section 4.2) and the popularity of the genre among the educated audience (Section 4.3). This will be followed with concluding remarks presented in Section 5.

2. Psalmody as music

The term *psalmody* is used in several senses in the literature on the topic. I am going to use it here as defined by Benson, who describes psalmody as:

a peculiar type of Protestant Church Song: — which was introduced into public worship at Geneva in connection with the Calvinistic Reformation; which spread, along with the Calvinistic doctrines, into France, the Netherlands and other continental countries; which became, under Genevan influence, the characteristic song of the Reformed Churches of Scotland and England; and which finally was carried across the ocean by immigrants from these various European countries, and took its place as a part of the culture of American churches, whether Episcopal, Congregational or Presbyterian. (Benson 1909: 1)

So, without going into detail, psalmody involved congregational singing of the metrical versions of the Psalms and is therefore denoted more precisely as *metrical psalmody*.

³ Ambrose 1962: CSEL 64:7, on Psalm 1 ([quot. too:] Barton 2013: 259).

Obviously, Psalm singing in the liturgy was not an innovation introduced by the Reformed Church. Psalms involve music by definition. The English word *psalm* comes from Latin *psalmos* — a borrowing from the Greek ψαλμός, being a translation of the Hebrew *mizmor* “melody of praise”. Psalms were “likely performed in the Temple and religious services in Judaism from before the exile and into the Second Temple period” (Flint 2013: 13). They were also performed in the first assemblies for Christian worship (Dyke 1913: 4; Long 2014: 545), and they immediately received a prominent place which they retained for the whole period of the Middle Ages and beyond. This position is best indicated by their (omni)presence in the daily *horarium*.

The Psalms in the medieval Christian Church were set to Gregorian chant which, reinforced by the linguistic barrier constituted by Latin, precluded general participation of the assembled congregation. The traditional Gregorian chant crystalized in the 8th and 9th centuries, when the Carolingian rulers started to introduce Roman chant, which later developed into what is now known as Gregorian chant. The chant was complex and required training, so only accomplished choirs and officiants could perform the Psalter to music. In parish churches the congregation was not exposed to the chant — it was considered “sufficient if the priest should recite the Office as his daily need of private devotion” (Benson 1909: 2).

The genuine innovation in the performance of the Psalter introduced by the Reformed Church consisted in the fact that, after hundreds of years of linguistic separation between the language of the people and the language of the liturgical Psalter, the Psalms started to be sung during the service in the vernacular. Moreover, the deliberately simple music of this performance⁴ allowed all members of the congregation to participate in the singing. So, for the first time after Latin ceased to be anybody’s mother tongue⁵, members of the Western Church could not only understand the words of the psalmist but they could also sing them.

Considering the literacy levels, which were still low at the time of the introduction of metrical psalmody into the liturgy of the Reformed Church⁶ and the still limited access to (printed) books in the sixteenth century, it is perhaps reasonable to ask at this stage to what

⁴ The musical settings of the metrical Psalter will be given a detailed treatment in Charzyńska-Wójcik (in prep.). What can and perhaps should be — at least very briefly — mentioned here is the fact that the Reformers’ views on music ultimately go back to those of St. Augustine, and in that sense, they represent a return to a tradition rather than a revolution: the original principle of the Reformed Church was that “curiosity of music should be avoided in the treatment of the Psalms” (Patrick 1949/1950: 69). Let me only remark here that Patrick (1949/1950: 79) considers the musical settings of the Scottish Psalter (1564) too complicated for the musically uneducated congregation: the sheer number of tunes — 105 — presented a problem. Munro (2000: 276) remarks that, by contrast, in the English Psalter of 1562 the texts were paired up with only 62 tunes. It has to be borne in mind, however, that Patrick’s assessment of the degree of difficulty of the 1564 performance is made with respect to the 1650 successor of the 1564 Psalter, while this dimension was not available for the contemporaries. The problem must have presented itself, but it was the earlier Gregorian chant that constituted a reference point for the new tunes. Moreover, Patrick’s views on the 1564 Psalter should be approached with caution for reasons which are spelled out in Charzyńska-Wójcik (in prep.).

⁵ I skip comments on the status of Hebrew and Greek as mother tongues and confine the discussion to medieval and early modern Christianity.

⁶ The numbers differed widely in Europe, showing very disparate values depending on the social class, geographical region and affluence. They were different for men and women, for the laity and the clergy. For details see for example Tóth (1996/2000). Consult also Sanders and Ferguson (2002), Gawthrop and Strauss (1984), and Vincent (2000).

extent the vernacularization of the Psalter enabled general participation in congregational singing. While removing the language barrier certainly made it possible for people to understand the text of the Psalms which were performed in the liturgy, the question remains of how the congregants were to deliver the text, assuming — as has been signalled above — that a significant proportion of them were still illiterate⁷ and that not all those who were literate could afford to buy the Book of Psalms (Austern, McBride and Orvis 2011: 13).

This question will be addressed as the paper unfolds and will receive an answer in Section 4.1. Before we can approach this issue, however, let us first touch upon the form of the Psalms as representing poetry, to contextualize the discussion presented in Section 4.

3. Psalms as poetry

The original Hebrew text of the Psalms was poetic⁸ — a statement which, as remarked on by Dobbs-Allsopp (2014: 79), is “naively tautological” — but the question of what qualifies as poetry is not naive at all, and should be addressed from a diachronic perspective. As there certainly is no space in this paper to discuss the issue⁹, let me only remark that what we classify as poetry in Hebrew did not rely on rhyme or metre but on a parallelism of passages¹⁰. It was a semantic rhyme rather than the phonetic one, which is so familiar to Europeans.

In the oldest preserved Hebrew manuscripts, the poetic form was not graphically distinguished from prose; it was given as continuous text (cf. Piela 2014). Dobbs-Allsopp (2014: 80) observes that Psalms receive a distinct formatting as early as in Hebrew manuscripts produced by the Masoretes, those from the Judean Desert, and in Greek manuscripts of the Septuagint. The semantic rhymes may not always be immediately obvious (Dobbs-Allsopp 2014), and may sound like repetitions — but only to an untrained ear. This parallelism of structure, enhanced by rich poetic imagery (LeMon 2014: 377), metaphor (Brown 2002), metonymy (Bott 2014: 131) and “overwhelming lyricism” (Dobbs-Allsopp 2014: 84) bore a sense of “lyrical elegance” (Brown 2014: 2) and constituted the essence of Hebrew poetry.

The Hebrew text was translated into Greek poetry (Aejmelaeus 2001: 72) and then from Greek to Latin¹¹ prose. The Latin text of the Psalter — solemn and revered by generations of clergy who all learnt it by heart, following the injunctions of the Rule of St. Benedict, and not necessarily understanding the sense of the text — was replaced by the rhyming poems of metrical psalmody. Arguably, this is a return to the original form in a European guise — metrical Psalms are certainly poetry. But does the metrical rhyming Psalter have the same elevated status as the original Hebrew text?¹²

⁷ An interesting fact reflecting the status and popularity of the metrical Psalter is the possession of the Psalter even by those who could not read — the Psalms were read to them.

⁸ The initiator of the study of form criticism in Biblical studies was Herman Gunkel, whose research on the poetic nature of the Hebrew Psalms continues to influence investigations of the Psalter (Bellinger 2014: 313).

⁹ For some remarks on the issue, see Dobbs-Allsopp (2014).

¹⁰ See Lowth (1995/1787) and Dobbs-Allsopp (2014) for more on the issue of the parallelism of passages.

¹¹ I do not intend to go into the details of the Septuagint, *Vetus Latina* and the three Latin versions associated with Jerome as these do not bear directly on the issue raised here. For an overview of these, see for example Charzyńska-Wójcik (2013) and Linde (2012/2015).

¹² On the issues related to an adequate translation of the poetry of the Psalms from Hebrew to English, see deClaisse-Walford (2013). The author, however, does not touch upon the issue of most immediate interest to us, i.e. the literary form as such.

Again, the versified form of the Psalter in the vernacular is not a Protestant invention. In the history of the English language, versified translations of the Psalter start in Anglo-Saxon times¹³, when Psalms 51–150 were rendered in Old English verse¹⁴. The next attempt is a complete versified Psalter in Middle English (early fourteenth century) known as the *Surtees Psalter*¹⁵. But again it is the introduction of these forms into the liturgy of the Church and the popularization of the genre that we owe to the Reformation¹⁶.

As for artistic value, the metrical Psalms have been described all too often as being characterized by unadorned literalism and by a lack of any artistic and aesthetic concerns (Gillingham 2008: 169). Hadden describes the literary merits of the Scottish Psalter in the following way:

Taken as a whole, the Psalter cannot be commented for its literary merit — indeed it is quite certain that the version would not be tolerated in the present day. Many of the translations are low and ludicrous, and not a few offend against all the recognised laws of good taste. (Hadden 1891: 19)

As noted by Smith (1946: 249), Thomas Warton, the author of *The History of English Poetry* (1824), “scoffs at the Sternhold-Hopkins version of the Psalms”. Quitslund (2008: 1) observes that this “distinctly bedraggled critical reputation” of the Psalms started in the middle of the seventeenth century and, as noted by Duguid (2014: 6), these attitudes “continued to colour twentieth-century psalmody research insofar as the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalms were generally relegated to the sidelines of musical and historical enquiry”. Quitslund (2008) mentions several instances of harsh criticism, which I will list just a few of here to exemplify their nature, and illustrate the extent of emotion involved in them. “Bald rhymes”, “a Common Nuisance to the Service of the Church” they are said to be characterized by “Barbarity and Botching”¹⁷. An example of the twentieth-century criticism of the literary qualities of the Scottish metrical Psalter is Patrick (1949/1950: 49), who states directly that “[t]here was little that was poetic in it; the aim was rather to give a close rendering of the original text than to satisfy the modern conceptions of good poetry” and in the same paragraph quotes “another critic”, whose name he does not give, who claims that “[t]he wording [of the Scottish Psalter of 1564] is flat and homely, and wholly fails to render the majesty of the Hebrew Psalms”.

¹³ The emergence of rhyme in English is dated to the late 7th century. See McKie (1997) for a useful overview of the issue.

¹⁴ The rendition completes Psalms 1–50 which represent prose. The whole text survives in a single manuscript copy (with the Latin and the vernacular juxtaposed in two columns) known as the Paris Psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Fonds Latin 8824). For more on this, see for example O’Neill (2001: 1–22). The manuscript is available at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8451636f/f1.image.r=psalterium%20duplex.langEN>.

¹⁵ For a description of the Psalter, see for example Sutherland (2015). The manuscript is available at: <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/detail/ODLodl~1~1~34770~122784:Psalter,-English-metrical-version->.

¹⁶ Duguid (2014) observes that metrical Psalms immediately gained widespread acceptance, with religious objections concerning the validity of metrical paraphrase raised only by Anabaptists, Barrowists and Brownists (cf. also Charzyńska-Wójcik 2016: 90).

¹⁷ The sources and details of who these descriptions are addressed at and in what context they were expressed are given in Quitslund (2008: 1).

Obviously, there is no easy way of comparing the poetic qualities of the Scottish Psalter with the original Hebrew, and we cannot say how well the semantic rhymes expressed by the parallelism of passages are transposed into meter. But we can look at the text of the Scottish Psalter and assess it on our own. Below I quote Psalm 1 of the Scottish metrical Psalter of 1564, as presented in the 1633 edition printed in Aberdeen¹⁸.

(1)

- 1 The man is blest, that hath not bent, to wicked rede his care:
Nor led his lyfe as sinners doe, nor sate in scornys chaire.
- 2 But in the Law of GOD the LORD, doth set his whole delight:
And in that Law doth exercyse him selfe, both day and night.
- 3 He shall be lyke the Tree that growes fast by the River syde;
Which bringeth forth most pleasant fruit, in her due tyme and tyde.
Whose Leafe shall never fade, nor fall; but flowrith still, and stand.
Even so shall all things prosper well, which that Man takes in hand.
- 4 So shall not the vngodlie men: they shall be nothing so.
But as the Dust, which from the Earth the Wynd dryues to and froe.
- 5 Therefore shall not the wicked men in Iudgement stand vpright:
Nor yet the Sinners, with the Iust, shall come in place, or fight.
- 6 For why? The way of Godlie Men, vnto the LORD is knowne:
And eke the way of wicked men, shall quyte be over-throwne

4. The quality of the text as rhyming verse

At first glance, we might be tempted to join in the harsh criticism of metrical psalmody: the Scottish Psalter of 1564 does not strike us as abounding in literary value. It is simple if not simplistic; it does not seem to offer the promised richness, let alone the healing powers associated with the Psalter ever since St. Ambrose. But, despite any impressions to this effect which we might have, and despite the long tradition of severe criticism addressed towards the metrical Psalms, the Scottish Psalter immediately received the official recognition of the Kirk of Scotland. The Kirk was established in 1560, and the Scottish General Assembly accepted the whole 1564 Psalter *en bloc*¹⁹, introducing it into the liturgy²⁰. In effect, the metrical Psalms “enjoyed *de facto* sacred status, since the psalms were an integral part of the monolithic national Kirk’s sacred liturgy. Its songs were essential to the holy worship” (Reid-Baxter 2006 [quot. too:] Duguid 2014: 201). Most importantly, however, it was fully embraced by the congregation, who immediately took to it²¹.

¹⁸ The full bibliographical data are given in the reference section under the entry “The Psalms of David in Prose and Metre with the Whole Forme of Discipline, and Prayers...”.

¹⁹ For details, see Duguid (2014).

²⁰ Moreover, the Psalter received support from the government and the local council. In 1579, the parliament joined the Kirk in encouraging the spread of metrical Psalm singing in Scotland (Patrick 1949/1950). In 1604 the elders of Aberdeen encouraged the literate to learn to sing the metrical Psalms (Duguid 2014: 206).

²¹ Metrical Psalmody in other European countries enjoyed equal esteem, though it was not officially accepted into the liturgy everywhere. A good example here might be the status of metrical Psalms in England, where they had to be silently smuggled into worship.

It is important to explain at this point that the text of the Scottish Psalter was not felt by all contemporaries to be perfect. On the contrary, there were several attempts at revising it. Even King James VI of Scotland was in favour of the revision, but the ministers demurred; not on the grounds of the text being perfect but because, as they argued, it was familiar.²² To fully understand the motives of King James, however, one has to realize that he himself versified the Psalter and wanted to promote his own version in this way. In effect, it is also from this perspective that one needs to view the Kirk's opposition to revision. Thus, the quotes given in (2) and (3) below, which exemplify this opposition (both of them ascribed to David Calderwood, a Scottish divine and historian), need to be viewed with a bit of caution; possibly as arguments against the introduction of what Patrick (1949/1950: 80) calls "an entirely obnoxious alternative" rather than as a directly expressed conviction that the familiarity of the text was a sufficient reason for not improving it.

(2)²³

"The people ar acquainted with the old metaphrase more than any book in scripture, yea, some can sing all, or the most pairt, without buik, and some that can not read, can sing psalmes".

(3)

"Both pastors and people be long custome, ar so acquainted with the psalmes and tunes thereof; that as the pastors ar able to direct a psalme to be sung agrieable to the doctrine to be delyvered, so he that taketh vp the psalme is able to sing anie tune, and the people for the most part follow him".

So we have an imperfect text, whose faults were evident both synchronically and diachronically, but it enjoyed instantaneous success in the congregation of the Kirk of Scotland. It is therefore reasonable to ask for the causes of this success.

First of all, let me remark that the imperfections of the Scottish Psalter were observed by very few of its contemporaries while, as noted above, an overwhelming majority immediately took to it. This was a phenomenon observed not only in Scotland, but in the whole of Protestant Europe. Metrical Psalms, wherever they appeared, conquered the hearts and souls of the believers. The performance of metrical Psalms was not limited to the church. Psalms were sung in the streets, in meeting places, and in the homes of royalty, of the nobility, and of ordinary urban and rural people. Why should that have been the case?

There were several reasons for this popularity, but I would like to focus on two of them here. The first was the form, which came to be so severely criticized from the mid-seventeenth century on; the second was related to early modern views on morality. I will move on to the former immediately, while the latter issue will be touched upon in the concluding section.

²² All attempts at correcting the text were suppressed until 1640, when it was openly admitted that the text needed revision. The effect of this revision saw light in 1650 and the Psalter of 1650 has been used in the liturgy up to this day with only very minor interventions. The extent of the revision is best illustrated by the fact that the 1650 text contains only 4% of the 1564 versification (Dickie 2013).

²³ Both quotes are presented here after Patrick (1949/1950: 80), who dates them to 1631.

Metrical Psalms were, as already mentioned, simple if not simplistic in form²⁴. They neither contained sophisticated vocabulary²⁵ nor convoluted figures of speech or complex grammar. Moreover, the Psalms were in verse, which made them easy to commit to memory²⁶. Early modern culture was, like the culture of the Middle Ages, a culture of memory which treasured mnemonic aids. One of the most powerful mnemonic aids is rhyme; the other is music, which cannot be discussed here due to limitations of space. I will therefore focus on rhyme, which was valued in the function of supporting memory; and frequent recourse to rhyme was made both in the Middle Ages and in the Early Modern period, even for textual productions not normally associated with the rhyming form today.

4.1. The use of rhyme as a mnemonic aid

The Early Modern period is characterised by the availability of print and wider access to books, while at the same time literacy levels still were relatively low. In effect, the early modern period continued to favour forms which facilitated the process of memorization. Let me present some examples of rhyming productions which would be out of place today, but which served their function well in the past.

In the Middle Ages, there was a whole tradition of rhyming Bibles, both in Latin and in the vernaculars, as well as rhyming treatises on grammar and vocabulary. I will start with the rhyming Bibles and then move on to the rhyming textbooks and dictionaries.

The term *rhyming Bibles* is a bit of a misnomer, since these productions cannot be claimed to be Bibles *per se*, clearly being appropriations of biblical material. However, in the following I will use the term *rhyming Bibles* as a simplification and in accordance with the medieval tradition of referring to these texts as *Bibles*. The most prominent example of the genre is the *Aurora* of Peter Riga, also known as *Biblia versificata* or the rhyming Bible of the Middle Ages, dated to about 1140-1209. It is not:

just a collection of paraphrases of Scriptural texts, although passages of this kind abound; nor is it primarily a Bible history, although some books are largely narrative. With its emphasis on allegorical and moral interpretations, it might more accurately be termed a verse commentary on the Bible, for in many respects it is similar to the prose commentaries from which much of its material was extracted, condensed, or paraphrased. The *Aurora* was a popularization which succeeded — perhaps beyond the wildest hopes of its author. (Beichner 1965: XI)

²⁴ This was part of a more general Reformation policy to appropriate the Psalms. For example, Luther explicitly advised pastors composing hymns based on Psalms to use „the most simple, common words but keeping to the meaning of the Psalms as closely as possible” (Anderson 2011: 142).

²⁵ With reference to Sternhold’s Psalms, which constituted the starting point of the Scottish Psalter of 1564, Temperley (1979: 26) remarks that they employed “direct and simple language, avoiding all flowery conceits and learned vocabulary”. Temperley notes further that they also exhibited “uniformity and simplicity of meter”. In contrast, Patrick (1949/1950: 79) claims that “the metres used [in the Scottish Psalter] were too various [30 different metres], and many of the versions were far from being simple enough to make memorizing easy for a people who were still, in the mass, unable to read”. Space limitations do not allow me to embark on a detailed discussion on the causes of these divergent opinions. The issue will be addressed in more detail in Charzyńska-Wójcik (in prep.).

²⁶ Verse was a typical feature of oral productions (Dobbs-Allsopp 2014: 89) and “the roots of psalmic verse are oral in nature”. The Psalms were rendered into verse “to make that song easier to learn and remember (Hawkins 2014: 100).

The popularity of the work among the clergy does not stem so much from the originality of the commentary (Riga's *Introduction* clearly acknowledges the sources) as from the attractiveness of the form: his poem represents the mainstream of popular twelfth-century exegesis, and its popularity continued in the following two centuries. Every cathedral or religious house in England and France which had a library possessed a copy (Beichner 1965: XXVII). Other European countries may have had a smaller number of copies (for details, see Beichner 1965: XXVII–XXX). The *Aurora* was also used as a schoolbook, but how widespread this use was has not so far been determined.

Another measure of the popularity of the *Aurora* is the frequency with which it was quoted by contemporary lexicographers. John of Genoa, also known as Johannes Januensis or Johannes Balbus, frequently quotes the *Aurora* in his *Catholicon*, and so does William Brito in his *Summa or Expositiones difficiliorum verborum de Biblia*. Another type of medieval dictionary — *Distinctiones monasticae* — most probably by the English Cistercian Ralph (Radulphus) of Coggeshall, lavishly quotes Peter Riga by name. In particular, Riga is quoted 25 times, which is slightly less than Virgil but slightly more than Ovid (Beichner 1965: XXXVI–XXXVII). Importantly, however, Riga's quotes outnumber those of any other medieval author.

The *Aurora* clearly inspired other medieval authors such as John Gower, who borrowed approximately 450 lines from Riga (Beichner 1965: XLV), and Geoffrey Chaucer, who was probably familiar with it from his youth. The text as such was also translated into French. Examples of French renditions are *Bible de Macé de la Charité* and Jehan Malkaraume's versification.

Bible de Macé de la Charité is a free translation of the *Aurora* into verse (Beichner 1965: XLII) executed at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As remarked by Beichner (1965), some material (9,000 lines out of the total of 43,000) was added with respect to the *Aurora*, in particular the whole Apocalypse, which appeared in the translation at the request of Étienne de Corbigny, the abbot of Fontmorigni. The other translation mentioned above is associated with Jehan Malkaraume. It is a verse Bible based on the *Aurora* and survives in a single manuscript from the mid-thirteenth century.

It is now time to move on to examples of Biblical verse which are independent of the *Aurora*. Examples of such productions are found in many European vernaculars, including an Old French anonymous rhymed paraphrase of the Song of Songs from the north of France (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 14966). England could also boast a biblical verse treatise: *Orrmulum*, which is a twelfth-century collection of versified biblical stories meant as homilies. The text is written in a meter of fifteen syllables divided into seven feet, i.e. septenarius. Its author, Orm, "has been severely criticised for the monotony of his meter (not true, actually)" (*The Orrmulum Project*). There is also an Anglo-Norman rhymed Apocalypse with a commentary by William Giffard, Chaplain of the Church of St. Edward, the old name of Shaftesbury Abbey (Fox 1913: 338). The Giffard manuscript from the middle of the fourteenth century consists of 4,600 lines of rhyming couplets.

Eight other French manuscripts of the Apocalypse in verse are known; in these the Scriptural text only is in verse, the commentary, where it exists, being in prose. The Giffard manuscript differs from them in having text and commentary in verse. (Fox 1913: 340)

Yet another Anglo-Norman versified text representing the genre is a collection of anonymous homilies in poetic form composed in the thirteenth century (Jones 1982).

Moving on across Europe, the genre is represented in the Netherlands and Catalonia. As for Dutch productions, we encounter *De Rjimbijbel*, also known as *Scolastica* — a thirteenth-century (1271) Dutch versification by Jacob von Maerlant, based on *Historia Scholastica* by Petrus Comestor. It consists of 27,000 verses and it “certainly marks the beginning of the popularization of the Bible in the Dutch language” (Klaassens 2006: 402). As the final example, let me present the Catalan *rhyming Bible* — *Biblia rimada*, also known as the *Biblia rimada de Sevilla* (because of the location of the manuscript). Composed between 1282 and 1325, this is again a free rhyming paraphrase based on Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica* in octosyllabic rhymed couplets. It includes twenty-one books of the Bible and at 26,336 verses it is, as noted by Casanellas (2014: 24), “the longest known Catalan text written in verse”.

Moving on to rhyming textbooks, the *Doctrinale puerorum* by Alexander of Villa Dei, also known as *De arte grammatica*, is a text from c. 1199 consisting of 2,645 hexameters explaining the grammar of Latin. This text was one of the most popular textbooks for teaching Latin in grammar schools all over Europe, and continued to be used (and printed) until the sixteenth century (Clair 1976: 123). It can be said to have become “virtually the universal grammar of most of Europe” (Cummings 2002: 115) by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was a spectacular success, being used as a classic Latin grammar book at schools and universities. According to Bursill-Hall (1977), it survives in over 400 manuscripts. Starting from the thirteenth century, it tended to be accompanied by the emendations and additions of glossators (<http://www.textmanuscripts.com/tm-assets/tm-descriptions/descriptions-traces-apr/tm-871-doctrinale.pdf>).

Another specimen of this type is represented by *Graecismus*, a grammar composed in verse by Eberhard of Béthune around 1212. Apart from grammar books, there were versified coursebooks for teaching Latin prose composition (Nauert 1995/2006: 49), versified medieval treatises on letter writing (Camargo 1996), and versified guides for learners of a second-language such as that of Walter de Bibbesworth’s *Tretiz*, which is “a straightforward versified guide to the use of French words” (Rothwell 1982: 282) composed between 1240–1250. It continued to be copied and used throughout the late medieval period. It was also a source for compilations of a similar type. One such instance is a fourteenth-century *Nominale sive Verbale*; another one is *Manières de langage* — a manual for conversation (Critten 2015: 927), where the vocabulary is sometimes given in prose and sometimes in verse, and some parts are clearly based on Bibbesworth’s *Treatise* (Dearnley 2016). It was also translated into English in the fifteenth century. The work is known as *Femina*, and its emergence is a testimony to the popularity of the genre and to the decreasing knowledge of French in England, as every French word needed to be given an English equivalent (Rothwell 1998: 55). To these we can also add metrical prayers and moralizing sentences (Quitslund 2008: 13).

The above is but a fragmentary illustration of the popularity and status of rhyming productions in the late medieval period. Recourse to rhyme was intended as a memory aid, and rhymes were highly valued in this function. This clearly did not change with the end of the Middle Ages. The pragmatic approach did not, however, reduce rhyme to a mnemonic aid in the eyes of contemporaries. On the contrary, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries abounded in versified lyrical productions which enjoyed very high status, as shown in the next section.

4.2. The status of rhyming verse among the contemporaries

To say that versifying Psalms was popular in the sixteenth century and beyond is to say nothing. Every poet in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tried their hand at some Psalms or the whole Psalter. The phenomenon was common throughout Europe among Catholics and Protestants alike, in England, France, Scotland, the Netherlands, Poland, etc.

As already remarked, versified paraphrases of the Psalms first appeared in England in the ninth century; they continued to be produced in the Middle Ages, but the real outburst of paraphrases of the Psalms started with humanist studies of the Hebrew Bible, which resulted in the emergence of many new translations of the Psalter directly from Hebrew to Latin²⁷. Some early important examples of such translations are given in (4) below.

(4)

- a. Felix Pratensis (1515)
- b. Sanctes Pagninus (1527-28)
- c. Martin Bucer (1529)
- d. Johannes Campensis (1532)
- e. Huldrych Zwingli (1534)

These translations constituted starting points for vernacular renditions of both prose²⁸ and poetry. It is crucial to add at this point that not all vernacular renditions were based directly on the new Latin translations. On the contrary, according to Patrick (1949/1950: 28), internal evidence suggests that Hopkins was influenced by Marot's French versifications. Kethe and Whittingham likewise translated the Psalms from French (Pratt 1935: 30). The issue of the exact sources on which individual versifications were based falls beyond the scope of this work²⁹ but it is important to remember that — in the midst of the Renaissance cry *ad fontes* — Scottish metrical Psalms were not based on the original Hebrew Psalms (Quitslund 2008), or even on the new Latin translations. Instead, they tended to rely on French³⁰ or German versifications of the Psalter. The focus of these translations was more on the suitability of the emerging form for congregational singing, than on their theological accuracy, so the fact that the target text was three times removed from the source did not worry contemporaries.

²⁷ It is important to emphasize that the urge for new translations of the Psalter from Hebrew does not represent a programmed rejection of the text of the Vulgate as such but of the derivative character of its relationship to the source. Therefore, representatives of the Reformed Church can be said to have followed Jerome, who translated the original Hebrew, sidestepping the Septuagint, which earned him fervent criticism in his lifetime.

²⁸ The first prose rendition from the new Latin was executed by George Joye, who published two English translations of the Psalter into English prose: one based on Bucer's Latin, the other on Zwingli's (cf. Charzyńska-Wójcik 2014 for an intriguing story of the publication of the former translation).

²⁹ A very detailed study of the sources is offered by Hadden (1891).

³⁰ French versifications of the Psalter (started by Clément Marot and completed after Marot's death by Théodore de Bèze or Beza) often constituted a model for other vernacular versions, having been translated into as many as 20 languages and dialects (Dutch, Flemish, English, Danish, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Swiss, Gascon, two forms of French, Polish, Bohemian, Hungarian, Slavic, Bantu, Tamil, Malay, Persian, besides Latin and Hebrew). Their popularity among the French can best be illustrated by the fact that they enjoyed at least 25 French editions in the first year of the publication of the complete collection in 1562.

“By the sixteenth century, it was *de rigueur* for poets to experiment with translations of one or more psalms, particularly the Penitential psalms”³¹ (Austern, McBride and Orvis 2011: 9). The long list of representatives of the genre in England, which we take here as an example, starts with Thomas Wyatt, who relied on the prose work of Pietro Aretino *Setti Salmi de la Penitentia di David* in forming his *terza rima*³². Then follows Thomas Smith, who versified Psalms during his imprisonment, as did Henry Howard the Earl of Surrey. Next come Thomas Sternhold³³ and John Hopkins, who are authors of the first texts that were included in the common Anglo-Scottish Genevan Psalter³⁴. Philip Sidney and his sister Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, George Buchanan, George Gascoigne, Francis Bacon, Henry Vaughan, and Samuel Woodford are but a few well-known representatives of this immensely popular genre. Even King James VI of Scotland tried his pen at Psalm versifications. Similarly, examples of French, German and Dutch versifiers abound.

Naturally, the versified vernacular Psalms:

allowed many laymen to appreciate the literary qualities of these poetic texts which they had repeated in Latin for centuries. It was not possible to adopt sincerely the psalmist's words as one's own unless they had been understood. Hence, many of the sixteenth-century psalmists, including Wyatt, Surrey, Sternhold and Sidney, made efforts to understand and interpret the meaning of the biblical psalmists by consulting the latest scholarly paraphrases and commentaries. They took seriously the opportunity offered by the example of the psalmist for spiritual rebirth and self-making. (Zim 1987: 204)

The opinion expressed above — very true in every respect — might imply that the adoption of verse was a purely pragmatic choice, determined solely by the presumed audience of the paraphrases. Metrical Psalms in vernaculars are by definition suitable for non-Latin speaking audiences, so the choice of rhyming meter might seem to be concomitant only with the aim of popularizing the contents of the Psalms among those who were barred access to Latin productions including the new Psalm renditions and the exegetical works on the Psalter. In other words, the form might seem to have been imposed by not always very well educated prospective readers, as evidenced by their ignorance of Latin. However, the genre was immensely popular in itself, rather than being merely a way of appealing to the general populace, as can be seen from the number of Latin versified paraphrases of the new Latin translations of the Psalter.

³¹ As observed by Austern, McBride and Orvis (2011: 10), the Penitential Psalms had a special allure and enchanted not only poets, but also writers and composers „on both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide”. Pettegree (2005: 192), in the broader context of metrical Psalms, also remarks (on the authority of Higman 2000) that Catholic composers were also not immune to the charm of the Psalms.

³² For a study of Wyatt's versifications, see Zim (1987: 43–74).

³³ Interestingly, Sternhold was the royal groom and dedicated his Psalms to the King, like the most significant of the French Psalm versifiers — Clément Marot. There is no evidence that “Sternhold had any direct knowledge of Marot's paraphrases”, as noted by Zim (1987: 122).

³⁴ They versified the Psalms independently, with Hopkins taking over after Sternhold's death, very much in awe and reverence with respect to him (for more on this see Duguid 2014).

4.3. The popularity of the versified Latin Psalms

The genre was widely practised in Latin, so the pragmatic aspects of its reception cannot be invoked as the *raison d'être* of these productions. Observe that the readership of Latin versified Psalms had access both to the (new) Latin translations of the Hebrew, and the whole voluminous exegetical output explaining the sense of the Psalms. The first Latin versified paraphrase of the Psalter emerged in the fifteenth century. It was the work of Mapheus Vegius — Pope Martin V's datary, but a veritable explosion of these versifications started in the 1520s. Below I list just a handful of authors from amongst those who are known for their Latin metrical paraphrases of the Psalter.

(6)

Ioannes Fabricius Bollandus
Franciscus Bonadus
George Buchanan
Helius Eobanus Hessus
Angelus de Faggis Sangrinus
Ioannes Sascerides
Adam Siberius
Ioannes Spangenbergius

These productions had a markedly different audience, an international and well-educated one, so the paraphrases could be printed and distributed internationally, overcoming the obvious limitations of the vernacular metre. And here is where we can truly appreciate the popularity of the genre: at least thirty authors of Latin paraphrases of the Psalter went through at least two editions, and twenty authors enjoyed over three editions. The record holder in terms of the number of editions was George Buchanan. His Latin versified paraphrase of the Psalms ran through 130 editions in 29 different cities. The runner-up was Helius Eobanus Hessus with 41 editions in 12 cities. Latin versified Psalms were extremely popular in Germany, France, Italy and England but they were also disseminated in Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, etc.

This scale shows clearly that versified paraphrases of the Psalms were a fully appreciated flourishing literary genre, even if diversified in terms of the intended audience, and in effect exhibiting varying degrees of sophistication expressed partly by the choice of the language (Latin or a vernacular, with the former implying a higher level of education), and through the choice of the linguistic complexity of the text.

5. Conclusion

The text of the Scottish Psalms was set in rhyming metre, which was additionally subjugated to pre-set tunes. This, it has to be admitted, certainly shows the prioritising of form over content. Moreover, the language of the Scottish Psalter was deliberately simple — a feature which has earned the metrical Psalms a lot of bitter but, I believe, undeserved criticism. It is precisely the simplicity of the text, in tandem with the versified metre and the simple accompanying tunes, that facilitated the memorising of individual Psalms — exactly the effect hoped for by the versifiers. In effect, everybody could join in in the congregational singing of the Psalms in the parish church. This gave people a strong sense of belonging and provided emotional consolation in times of distress as well as offering

them morally appropriate entertainment. The love of song was capitalized on in metrical Psalms, which explains their immediate success in all the countries where they emerged. But while singing lay folk songs was considered improper or even immoral, singing Psalms provided entertainment that was more than approved of.

In conclusion, the Scottish metrical Psalms are imperfect, but only from the perspective of a modern critic. What seem to be imperfections from our perspective, were in fact advantages to the early modern audience. A form easy to commit to memory but at the same time highly respected as a literary genre turned the Psalms into a bridge between the literate and illiterate, the rich and the poor, men and women, the clergy and the lay people. Now they could all join their hearts and voices in congregational psalm singing.

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