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**King'oo, Clare Costley. Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in  
Late Medieval and Early Modern England**

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of truth in Shakespeare's tragedy affixes itself to Othello, whose stories are dubious and who cannot recognize the spiritual truth represented by Desdemona. This leaves him subject to a moralized fate similar to that inflicted upon the French Huguenot's Holofernes, for whom boastful self-fashioning led inevitably to blasphemy and then to death. Hillman's reading importantly reveals Shakespeare's play as a "psychological adaptation of Reform theology" (74), but unexpectedly leaves Desdemona as little more than an idealized function. The chapter moves on to consider Tamburlaine, who like Holofernes is threatened with emotional defeat by the beautiful captive Zenocrate. But Tamburlaine is able to "co-opt Zenocrate's [divinely-imbued] strength" and master the divinity that normally humbles the avatars of Holofernes (88). Marlowe conjures the tradition only to invert it and thus to emphasize the indeterminability of truth.

*French Origins* offers no conclusion, though something further might be said about the tragic interactions of history and metaphysics, as well as about the "circulation" of discourses between France and England. It is surprising, as well, that the author never returns to the issue addressed in the book's opening paragraphs, that of the "process of disengagement" obliquely visible in the discursive engagement between France and England. There is very little room for formal textual analysis anywhere in the book, which diminishes the force of some claims, particularly those involving the humour in hyperbolic neo-Senecanism. Nevertheless, *French Origins* offers a persuasively nuanced critique of what Hillman calls the "Myth of the Single Source," and memorably demonstrates its central premise that writers read and wrote "through and across" multiple texts.

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**King'oo, Clare Costley.**

*Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England.*

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. xix, 283. ISBN 978-0-268-033248 (paperback) \$38.

The Latin translation of Psalm 51 begins with *Miserere mei, Deus*, and from this opening King'oo has derived the title of an exemplary interdisciplinary study of

the penitential psalms in late medieval and early modern England. In a rather slender volume and in a plain style, King'oo weaves together the material history of the book with literary criticism. The result is an examination of the fate of penitential psalms from late medieval Catholicism through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. This study reveals not only distinctive approaches but also surprising continuity between periods and confessional standpoints traditionally thought of in discrete terms.

King'oo takes pains to describe how seven psalms became isolated from the psalter as a distinct group organized around the theme of penitence; the question is a key feature of her argument. There is nothing inherent in the psalms that leads to such a grouping. Rather, their collection and designation as penitential derives from a particular strategy of reading that formed in the early Church and was given shape by Augustine: King'oo calls it a "penitential hermeneutics." Thus, *Miserere Mei* is as much about the fate of Augustinian hermeneutics as about the fate of the seven psalms in book culture. Penitential hermeneutics can be summed up relatively simply as a reading of the psalms that views the various afflictions described by the speaker (presumably the historical David, but different iterations of the psalms in print complicate this) as the outcome of sin, driving the speaker, and reader, to repentance. The development of this hermeneutic is laid out clearly in its various Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist forms, finally to be parodied in the Elizabethan era and reclaimed by exiled Catholics on the eve of the ascension of King James. King'oo's methodology in the study of book history is multi-faceted. Arguments constructed in this vein draw upon iconography, conditions of production (networks of patronage, circulation, the timing of printing and distribution), analysis of para-textual material, and the location of works within the early modern print market. The result is a series of fascinating and insightful studies that weave together twin approaches—material history and literary criticism—into a critical history that surprises in its elegance.

King'oo aptly demonstrates that because the penitential psalms highlighted the process of sin and contrition, they reveal changing attitudes to sin and its remedies: for example, a shift in late fifteenth-century illustrations of David accompanying the psalms in the Books of Hours. Where previously these images had shown the king in repentance, they were now reconfigured as David spying on Bathsheba, more closely allying sin with sexual deviance. Psalm commentaries from the early sixteenth century show a transitional period in which

the Catholic sacrament of penance—focusing on contrition, confession, and satisfaction—faces a challenge from Luther who uses the penitential psalms to underscore the futility of works in the face of inner or “native” sin. A study of verse paraphrases shows Thomas Wyatt standing out among his contemporaries by dramatizing the transition from Catholic to Lutheran perspectives on penance within the penitential psalms themselves. A study of Elizabethan devotional manuals shows the differences in evangelical perspectives on sin becoming more pronounced, as the Catholic sacrament of purifying through penance is placed alongside a Lutheran wallowing in native sin and a Calvinist fear and terror of inherent abjection. Concurrent with the emergence of the Geneva Bible and translations of Beza, the manuals function as a vehicle for the expression of factional struggles arising out of the Elizabethan compromise. King’oo stresses finally that even though the penitential psalms were not counted as a group in the Book of Common Prayer, writers, lyricists, and songwriters kept returning to them with some innovative adaptations to the end of the sixteenth century. Much of this innovation involved taking the psalms far less seriously, transforming the Augustinian hermeneutic into a parody of penance; yet it also involved their reclamation by English Catholics, reworking traditional uses into a new context of exile and underground spirituality.

Overall, *Miserere Mei* is to be applauded for its concreteness, if not on every page. King’oo’s claims on the dating of Wyatt’s *Certain psalms* and the identity of a “John Harrington” who appears on the title page (elaborated upon in the appendix) appear conclusive, but may prove controversial depending on one’s evaluation of the evidence. King’oo’s use of modal verbs like “might” and “may” also adds a speculative tone to some of the book’s minor arguments. However, this by no means detracts from what should be seen as a splendid achievement of interdisciplinary inquiry.

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