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978-0-521-13701-0 - Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England

Lily B. Campbell

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN Milton turned to divine poetry, writing of ‘the heaven-descended King’ in his ode *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, he invoked the Heavenly Muse.<sup>1</sup> When he began *Paradise Lost*, pursuing ‘Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme’, he again invoked the aid of the Heavenly Muse, joining with his plea an invocation to the Holy Spirit. From 1574, when Du Bartas published *La Muse Chrestienne* containing the poem *L’Uranie*, Urania the Muse of Astronomy had been taken over as the Christian Muse,<sup>2</sup> and as Milton began the Seventh Book of *Paradise Lost*, his description echoed the associations that had grown up about her:

Descend from Heav’n *Urania*, by that name  
If rightly thou art call’d, whose Voice divine  
Following, above th’ *Olympian* Hill I soar,  
Above the flight of *Pegasean* wing.  
The meaning, not the Name I call: for thou  
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top  
Of old *Olympus* dwell’st, but Heavenly born,  
Before the Hills appear’d, or Fountain flow’d,  
Thou with Eternal Wisdom didst converse,  
Wisdom thy Sister, and with her didst play  
In presence of th’ Almighty Father, pleas’d  
With thy Celestial Song.

The consecrating of Urania to Heavenly tasks gave new inspiration to a movement already gathering momentum in the Christian world. The invention of printing had made possible the wide distribution of the rediscovered literature of the ancient pagan world. Translation, emulation, creation followed, and a great secular literature was coming into being.

<sup>1</sup> The change to divine poetry with the writing of his poem on Christ’s nativity is recorded in *Elegy VI*, written to Charles Diodati. I have used throughout the edition of *Milton* prepared by Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1937) and quotations from Milton’s Latin are given in the English translations of this edition. Milton’s change to divine poetry is discussed by J. H. Hanford, *John Milton* (New York, 1949), but without recognition of the term *divine poetry*.

<sup>2</sup> See ch. ix.

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The old romances too, found readers and imitators. It is not surprising that the need for an accessible Bible and a Christian literature became insistent.

It was Milton who was most eloquently to answer those who claimed precedence for the ancient classics because of their excellence and their antiquity when he represented Christ replying to Satan's praises of them:

Or if I would delight my private hours  
 With Music or with Poem, where so soon  
 As in our native Language can I find  
 That solace? All our Law and Story strew'd  
 With Hymns, our Psalms with artful terms inscrib'd,  
 Our Hebrew Songs and Harps in *Babylon*,  
 That pleas'd so well our Victors' ear, declare  
 That rather *Greece* from us these Arts deriv'd;  
 Ill imitated, while they loudest sing  
 The vices of their Deities, and their own  
 In Fable, Hymn, or Song.

Little to profit or delight will be found in them when their  
 'swelling Epithets' are removed, and they

Will far be found unworthy to compare  
 With *Sion's* songs, to all true tastes excelling,  
 Where God is prais'd aright, and Godlike men,  
 The Holiest of Holies, and his Saints;  
 Such are from God inspir'd, not such from thee;  
 Unless where moral virtue is express'd  
 By light of Nature not in all quite lost.<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew prophets too, Milton's Christ claimed, better than the great pagan orators, taught 'What makes a Nation happy, and keeps it so'.

As Sidney summarized the arguments in defence of Poetry, as Raleigh summarized in his preface to *The History of the World* the claims of history as a guide to the present, so Milton summarized in these and like passages the arguments for a Christian literature based on the Bible, a new divine literature.

The beginnings of the movement which produced a divine

<sup>1</sup> *Paradise Regained*, Bk iv, ll. 331-52.

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literature in England were halting and often awkward, but the progress toward its fulfilment is worth recording. It is my purpose, then, in this study to trace the movement in the sixteenth century which resulted in the poetry of Donne and Herbert and Milton and those others in the seventeenth century who praised God in nobler words and sounder rhythms.

If I were to undertake to trace the whole movement to make the Bible the guide to Christian living I should require more years than I can hope to live and more volumes than any printer would publish. In education Henry VIII decreed that the fundamentals of religion might be learned in English; Colet thought the boys at St Paul's school might learn their Latin through reading Lactantius, Prudentius, Proba, Sedulius, and Juvenecus as well as the pagan classics. The colloquies of Cordier or Castellio were offered as substitutes for the *Flowers of Terence*. Hebrew and Greek knowledge was recognized as a pathway to the Scriptures. Rhetoric and logic were offered in textbooks with all the examples culled from the Bible. King James in Scotland made the Book of Revelation serve the purpose of instruction in civil government. Even the stratagems of war could be learned, some thought, from the Bible rather than from Frontinus. Indeed, there were attempts to make the Bible a complete and exclusive guide to every aspect of Christian living for states as well as individuals. But this guide must be made available in their own languages if men and states were to live by it.

That the translation of the Bible into languages familiar to the common people of all nations was, therefore, a major purpose of the reformation movements in England as well as on the continent of Europe does not need to be re-demonstrated here. That making these translations accessible to all who could read their native languages was pressed as a means of combating the monopoly claimed by the Roman Catholic Church for its right to serve as the only guide on the journey to an assured heaven is also not a matter for further dispute. What I propose to try to show is that both Catholic and non-Catholic writers turned to the Bible to find in Latin or in the vernacular a means of combating the influence of the revival of classical

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learning and the developing taste for pagan and secular story and song. The Jesuit school drama written in Latin was as much a part of the movement as were the divine sonnet sequences which appeared in the vernacular in various countries.

In England the first phase of the movement was represented by translation—of the whole Bible into prose, the poetic parts of the Bible into English verse. Next came the adapting of Bible story to the various literary genres as they became current in secular literature. Finally there was the free use of Bible story as foundation, ornament, or atmosphere in original creations. I am restricting this study to English poetry and drama in the sixteenth century, and to poetry and drama based directly on the Bible. I am excluding other devotional poetry as well as drama devoted solely to a polemical purpose.

The term *divine poetry* has, I think, been generally misunderstood, though it is a recurrent term in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For instance, C. S. Lewis summarizing Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* represents Sidney's 'kinds' as 'the devotional, the philosophical, and the fictional'.<sup>1</sup> But Sidney did not use the word *devotional*; what he said was that among poets 'The chiefe both in antiquitie and excellencies were they that did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of GOD', and he instanced the writer of Job, Solomon in his Ecclesiastes and Proverbs as well as in his Song of Songs, Moses and Debora in their hymns, and David in his Psalms as such writers. Only in a very broad sense can all of these works be termed devotional, and Sidney called David's Psalms 'a divine Poem',<sup>2</sup> though the Psalms are of course devotional. Kathleen Tillotson says of Drayton that he is 'perhaps above all, a religious poet—not so much in his biblical poems as in his view of poetry. (He speaks of it always as a something hallowed, a divine power; and his most powerful images are, like Milton's, celestial and starry.)'<sup>3</sup> But when Drayton published in *The Muses Elizium* poems recounting the Biblical stories of Noah and the Flood, of Moses, and of David and Goliath, he set them off in a separate section

<sup>1</sup> *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, 1954), p. 344.

<sup>2</sup> See ch. vi.

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. by J. William Hebel, vol. v, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson and B. H. Newdigate (Oxford, 1941), p. xiv.

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with a separate dedication calling them *divine poems*. Mrs Tillotson says, however, that in spite of the invocation which opens 'Noahs Floud', it cannot be regarded as a religious poem.<sup>1</sup>

It is this use of *devotional* and *religious* and sometimes of *theological* which seems to me to cloud the fact that there was a movement to substitute divine poetry for the secular poetry which was coming off the presses in the sixteenth century, a movement to substitute Biblical story for secular story, to substitute a Christian mythology for a pagan mythology, as well as to substitute prayer and praise of the Christian God for poetry addressed to an unkind mistress. That it is the subject-matter of the poem or drama that makes it divine poetry or divine drama and not the religious or non-religious attitude of the author is implicit in the description of the kinds of poetry distinguished by Sidney. It is explicit in Peter Martyr's *Common Places*: 'betweene Poems divine and humane, this is the difference; that humane Poems doo set foorth the renoume of kings, princes, feelds, cities, regions, castels, women, marriages, and sometime of brute beasts. But divine Poems doo onlie sing of God, and celebrate him onlie'.<sup>2</sup> The *Refutation* by 'I.G.' of Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* would, indeed, make divine drama worse than non-religious: 'The *Materiall* cause or matter of Playes is their Subject whereupon they speake and entreat, and that is two fould, either *Divine* or *Prophane*. If Playes be of *Divine* matter, then are they most intollerable, or rather *Sacrilegious*'.<sup>3</sup> That I.G.'s attitude was not that of the participants in the movement to create a divine literature is obvious, but it illustrates the point which I want to stress, that divine literature depends upon its subject-matter.

No one of the writers of divine literature doubted that it could and should be written in prose or poetry, in any and all of the metrical forms which were used in profane verse, in any and all of the literary genres which were currently in use. When Milton translated the Psalms, when he wrote his divine poetry as ode and epic and tragedy, when he turned to Urania

<sup>1</sup> *Drayton*, vol. v, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Common Places* (London, 1583), part 3, cap. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Reprinted with Heywood's work in *Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints* (New York, 1941), with introduction and notes by R. H. Perkinson, p. 54.

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as his Muse, he was following in the long-established tradition for the divine poet.

There were some who professed a desire to clothe their high message in plain and humble garb, but for the most part, they accepted what Thomas Nashe expressed, though they might not have accepted Thomas Nashe. Dedicating his *Christs Tears over Jerusalem* to Lady Elizabeth Carey, and noting that ‘Fames eldest favorite, Maister Spencer, in all his writings he prizeth you’, he said: ‘Unworthy are wee of heavenly knowledge, if we keepe from her any one of her hand-maydes. Logique, Rethorique, History, Philosophy, Musique, Poetry, all are the hand-maides of Divinitie. She can never be curiously drest, or exquisitely accomlisht, if any of these be wanting.’<sup>1</sup> It will be apparent in the following pages that most of the writers of divine literature must have been well acquainted with these handmaids to divinity, for most of them had had an university education or had been well trained in music. That they lacked, many of them, that something more—call it divine fury or what you will—is only too apparent, but I am concerned here with the beginnings and the purposes which underlay the studied attempt to oppose the pagan and secular literature seeming to many good men in the sixteenth century to lead the people away from God.

I have chosen to trace rather a narrow path by which the movement came into being in England. There were many contributions which I have not recorded, but I think the path I have tried to describe is the most important one.

<sup>1</sup> Pub. 1593. Nashe says in his dedication: ‘To write in Divinitie I could not have adventured, if ought else might have consorted with the regenerate gravitie of your judgement. Your thoughts are holy, holy is your life: in your hart lives no delight but of Heaven. Far be it I should proffer to unhallow them, with any prophane papers of them.’

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PART I

DIVINE POETRY IN SIXTEENTH-  
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## CHAPTER I

## THE FORERUNNER: SAVONAROLA

IT was in the sixteenth century that the Christian Bible came once more to stand forth in its glory, undimmed by its cloud of witnesses. In England as in the rest of Christendom the Bible itself had become almost lost in the multitude of interpretations, in the intellectual tangles of theological logic, in the rivalries of dispute over dogma. To the majority of the people it was an inaccessible and a forbidden book; inaccessible because only the learned could understand the Latin in which it was available, and forbidden even to those who could read Latin save only those duly authorized by the Church. In England, Knight records in his life of Colet, 'that Use and Study of the *Scriptures* was so low at that Time, and even in the University of *Oxford*, that the being admitted a *Batchelor of Divinity*, gave only Liberty to read the *Master of Sentences* [Pet. Lombard], and the highest Degree of *Doctor of Divinity*, did not admit a man to the Reading of the *Scriptures*'.<sup>1</sup> In Cambridge, too, Mullinger writes that the lecturers were not allowed to lecture on the Bible until they had lectured on the Sentences.<sup>2</sup>

The resurrection of the Greek and Roman past known as the Revival of Learning had brought first to Italy and then to all of western Europe and to England a new approach to all the arts and a new interest in human life as it is lived on earth. It had brought also the old pagan gods to the horizons of thought and pagan philosophies to rival the philosophy which was formulated in the theology of the Christian church. The invention of printing had made possible the dissemination of learning of every kind to others than the cloistered few and the small number having access to princely libraries. Even the spiritual shepherds of men turned their thoughts to secular affairs, to the enjoyment which their five senses could provide, to the worship in spirit and sometimes in fact of the pagan gods.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Knight, *The Life of Dr John Colet* (London, 1724), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Mullinger, *The University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1873), vol. 1, p. 363, n. 2, and Index under *Bible*, p. 653.



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## DIVINE POETRY

Machiavelli is not generally chronicled among the reformers of the church, but he wrote that nothing could ‘portend the ruine of our Church with more certainty, than that those who are nearest the Church of Rome (which is the head of our Religion) should have less religion than other people’, adding that anyone comparing the current practice with the primitive foundation, would find that ‘either utter destruction, or some great judgment was hanging over our heads’.<sup>1</sup> Those who were to lead the rebellion against the licentiousness of their time did in fact attempt to do just what Machiavelli suggested here, to go back to the source of their religious faith. They wanted to go behind the Sentences, behind all the niceties of dogma, to the Bible itself. They wanted to revisit the early fathers of the church and to proclaim anew a fresh and vigorous faith.

The luxury with which the Borgias clothed their debaucheries, the papal sanction given to war and to lust, the penetration of the influence of the pagan classics into every phase of life could but call forth eventually a revolt, and, like another John the Baptist, the friar Girolamo Savonarola<sup>2</sup> came from his Florentine monastery in the last decade of the fifteenth century, denouncing the evils of the life about him and crying for repentance lest destruction ensue both here and in the hereafter. Very rarely have men’s hearts been so moved as they were by his words. Learning flourished, but religion was being destroyed, and the two things were associated in Savonarola’s mind. To him a return to the Bible and its teaching was the only means of salvation. ‘Go thou to Rome and throughout Christendom,’ he exclaimed; ‘in the mansions of the great prelates and great lords, there is no concern save for poetry and the oratorical art. Go thither and see, thou shalt find them all with books of the humanities in their hands, and telling one another they can guide men’s souls by means of Virgil, Horace, and Cicero.’ The clergy, he said, ‘tickle men’s ears with talk of Aristotle and Plato, Virgil and Petrarch, and take no concern

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Machiavel, *The Discourses upon the First Decade of Titus Livius in Works* (London, 1720), p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> One of the best contemporary accounts of Savonarola is given in *The Historie of Guicciardini*, trans. by Geoffrey Fenton (London, 1599), Bk III (the first ed. was printed in 1579).

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## SAVONAROLA

for the salvation of souls. Why, instead of expounding so many books, do they not expound the one Book in which is the law and spirit of life!<sup>1</sup>

Yet in a work that seems to have been almost lost sight of, *Opus perutile de divisione ac utilitate omnium scientiarum*, Savonarola showed that he would not altogether abolish the pre-Christian learning. 'There is', he wrote, 'a false race of pretended poets, who can do naught but run after the Greeks and Romans, repeating their ideas, copying their style and their metre; and even invoking the same deities, almost as though we were not men as much as they, with reason and religion of our own. Now this is not only false poetry, but likewise a most hateful snare to our youth.' Nevertheless, he recognized that 'even among the ancients, there be some that condemned vicious things, and extolled the generous deeds of great men: by these, poetry was turned to good use, and I have neither the right nor the wish to condemn them'. The safeguard that he would set up was 'a strong and healthy Christian training' before any study of the heathen poets was allowed.<sup>2</sup> It must be remembered too that it was he who saved the great Medician library deposited in the convent of Saint Mark's when its confiscation was threatened by Medici creditors. His was, indeed, the general attitude to be taken by those rebelling against the paganizing and secularizing of the intellectual life of Christendom.

In a practical way also Savonarola demonstrated the means by which the obnoxious practices of the times might be sup-  
planted. At the time when Savonarola was at the height of his popularity as a preacher in Florence, the Florentine delight in carnivals and pageants was accentuated by Lorenzo the Magnificent, whose most famous invention was, according to Villari, the *Canti Carnascialeschi* 'to be sung in carnival masquerades of the triumph of death, troops of devils, or other whimsicalities of the time'. The songs are universally described as adorned with obscenities and vulgarities. In 1497 and 1498 Savonarola inspired a counter-celebration, known as the Burn-

<sup>1</sup> Pasquale Villari, *The Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola* (London and New York, 1888), pp. 179–83.

<sup>2</sup> Villari, pp. 500–5. See also Piero Misciattelli, *Savonarola*, trans. by M. Peters (Cambridge, 1929), pp. 30–2 and 101–2.