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## The Psalter Project: Providing Mediated Access to Religio-Political Subjects in Early Modern England

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Emerging from the crucible of the religious upheaval that characterizes the English Renaissance is arguably the most influential English book ever printed in terms of its impact on Anglophone religious, literary, popular, and legal culture: *The Book of Common Prayer* (BCP). Encoded within its pages is a kind of algorithm, an annually recurring process, a *ritualization* of both private devotion and public worship for generations of post-Reformation English readers. Taking our cue from Brad Pasanek (*Metaphors of Mind: An Eighteenth-Century Dictionary*, 2015) and Peter Stallybrass (“Against Thinking.” *PMLA*, Vol. 122, No. 5), both of whom have drawn useful analogies between the database and the commonplace book, we employ the creative anachronism of the “Bible app” to describe the function of the BCP in early modern England. As the first such “app” of its kind, the BCP choreographed religious meaning and ritualized worship for a whole generation of English Bible readers, shaping them into religio-political subjects who were then able to situate their lived experiences within a communally shared time and space. From the perspective of the Early Modern layperson, the BCP provides mediated access to the newly translated biblical text. Of course, from the abstracted perspective of the nascent nation-state of England, the BCP functions as a way to mitigate new anxieties surrounding the democratization of sacred scripture. As the legally established, official means by which sacred text is encountered, the BCP is nothing less than a masterpiece of social engineering.

To extend the metaphor of text as program, the BCP can also be thought of as a class, one which can be in-

herited and sub-classed, instantiated and “hacked” according to the agenda of particular readers who would produce, via their nuanced reading of BCP ritual, slightly different kinds of subjects according to the specific context in which they find themselves. Of particular interest to the project at hand is a 1586 BCP which has been highly “sub-classed” by one of its owners. Bound together with the prayer book is an entire psalter, whose collection of 150 psalms is cross-referenced in a single hand, which also makes occasional thematic/tonal annotations. In our examination of this prayer book, we wish to develop a methodology for accessing the kind of subject such a “re-engineered” BCP might have produced.

Implied in the very notion of access, of course, is mediation. Within the limited scope of our project, we do not have recourse to the intense amount of labor required to perform a rigorous exegesis of the entire psalter according to how its 16<sup>th</sup>-century readers might have read it. What we do have, via the psalter’s marginalia, is what one (or perhaps two) reader(s) selected as noteworthy in their BCP-regulated practice of reading the Psalms. We also have our own attempts to thematize and register the tone of those same texts. Given these assets, we attempt to provide via the Psalter Project a representation of how a subject produced by this prayer book might look *from our perspective*. Our hope is that, despite the inherently mediated nature of such a representation, we might provide students and scholars alike a better understanding of the “programmatically” nature of religious para-texts like the BCP.

The Psalter Project was born out of Dr. Nandra Perry’s scholarship in Early Modern English literature in partnership with Bryan Tarpley’s work as Lead Software Applications Developer for the Initiative for Digital Humanities, Media, and Culture (IDHMC) at Texas A&M University. Perry’s work with the 1586 prayer book led her to apply for a Summer Technical Assistance Grant with the IDHMC, at which point she was awarded some of Tarpley’s development time. Together, they (we) designed a relational database schema for recording the cross-references and tags found in the 1586 prayer book, as well as a web-interface for entering and viewing them. A [beta version of the project](#) is available for viewing.

Before commencing development on the Psalter Project web app, a survey of extant, web-based tools was performed to determine whether any one tool (or collection of tools) already satisfied our requirements. Given the marginalia we have to work with (a large amount of scriptural cross-references and thematic

tags), we wanted a tool to facilitate the capture and analysis of this data. While there are indeed several digital annotation tools available, such as MIT's [Annotation Studio](#), or the University of Virginia's [PRISM](#), none of these tools allow for the rapid entry of scriptural verse range references and tags. Tarpley implemented the database schema by creating a MySQL database and wrote the web application in Python using the Django web framework, as well as other web-related technologies, such as the jQuery Javascript library and the Bootstrap CSS framework. The database and web app are both hosted by the IDHMC's server infrastructure at Texas A&M. As a way of beta-testing the app, Perry then recorded a sampling of the psalter's cross-references and tags, and also included her own tagging of the referenced verses in terms of both thematic content and perceived emotional impact (affect).

While the Psalter Project is still in development both in terms of methodology and finished product, a preliminary sketch of our reader is emerging via the various views made available through the web app. There is a visualization of the thematic and affective tags in the form of tag-clouds weighted by frequency, a view of the most frequently referenced verses along with their tags, a break-down of all referenced verses (and associated tags) by any specific thematic or affective tag, a presentation of the network of referenced verses (and associated tags) by any specific verse, and a presentation of any of the 150 Psalms in its entirety where referenced verses can be hovered over, displaying tags and referenced verses. At this initial stage, we believe that this multi-faceted portrayal is revealing a reader with a profound sense of group identity as the loyal subject of a just God who provides deliverance to the deserving and punishment to "bad" subjects and oppressive outsiders. The effect, it would seem, is the sacralization of a religio-politics in which the reader's relationship to God is analogous to his/her relationship to the nation-state (and vice versa), thereby justifying, in turn, a posture of hostility toward outsiders and "bad" subjects.

With this paper, we intend to not only provide a more fully fleshed-out representation of the Early Modern religio-political English subject, but to interrogate the various assumptions and methodologies we use to provide this representation so that we might improve the Psalter Project web application. We hope to be able to provide this web application (both in terms of an open-source repository and as an IDHMC hosted web service) to other scholars in the future, so

that they too might be able to provide (mediated) access to religio-political subjects.