Introduction

The Seven Penitential Psalms

This book charts the rich and, at times, tumultuous history of the seven Penitential Psalms in England in the late medieval and early modern era. During this period, the Penitential Psalms inspired an enormous amount of creative and intellectual work: in addition to being copied and illustrated in Books of Hours and other prayer books, they were expounded in commentaries, imitated in vernacular translations and paraphrases, rendered into lyric poetry, and even modified for singing. It is the task of *Miserere Mei* to explore these various material and generic transformations. Combining the resources of close literary analysis with those of the history of the material text, this study reveals not only that the Penitential Psalms lay at the heart of Reformation-age debates over the nature of repentance but also, and more significantly, that they constituted a site of theological, political, artistic, and poetic engagement *across* the many polarities that supposedly separate late medieval from early modern culture.

The Penitential Psalms are the seven psalms numbered 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142 in the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate Bibles; and 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 in the Hebrew Masoretic

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Miserere Mei examines the fate of this resilient tradition in England, in an era when the seven psalms held great sway over the religious and the lay alike—roughly from the end of the fourteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth century. In terms of vernacular literature, then, this study stretches broadly from the Middle English metrical paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms by Richard Maidstone (composed in the late 1380s or early 1390s) to the early modern English “odes,” or songs, based on those same psalms by Richard Verstegan (first published in 1601). Yet this book also focuses more narrowly on the fortunes of the Penitential Psalms in the mid- to late sixteenth century, when the sequence became caught up in Reformation controversy. The objective of this endeavor (that is, of the simultaneous adumbration of both a longer and a shorter history of the Penitential Psalms) is not to insist upon the much-invoked opposition between late medieval and early modern modes of expression. Rather, it is to highlight how certain Reformation and post-Reformation habits of reading and writing derive directly from (and may depend crucially on) important pre-Reformation antecedents.

To put it plainly, the Penitential Psalms are of significance precisely because they survived—because they made it through the turbulent years of the mid-sixteenth century as a unit, and continued to bear meaning in a range of contexts (not just religious but also social and political, artistic and poetic), even after undergoing intense reevaluation. Prior to the Reformation, these psalms served both as important prayers of repentance and as valuable petitions for the souls of the dead. Deeply embedded in liturgical and devotional practice, and virtually indispensable to the Latin Church’s economy of salvation, they could easily have been jettisoned from post-Reformation culture. Yet in the decades following the upheaval of the Reformation the Penitential Psalms were
not cast away but instead adopted, adapted, and appropriated—in some cases radically so. Indeed, the literary, cultural, and material history of England in the period of the Reformation bears witness to a remarkable eruption of activity around the Penitential Psalms, as the series was translated, paraphrased, contested, fragmented, set to music, copied, printed, marketed, smuggled across the Channel, and so on.

The list of English individuals who engaged explicitly with the Penitential Psalms between the first years of the Reformation and the end of the sixteenth century includes, but is not limited to, figures as diverse as John Croke, Sir Thomas Wyatt, John Day, John Stubbs, George Gascoigne, Sir John Harington, William Byrd, and William Hunnis. (There is also some evidence that Edmund Spenser produced a rendition of the seven psalms, though, unfortunately, this particular adaptation appears to be no longer extant.) Reworking the sequence in ways that were sometimes subversive, sometimes reactionary, these translators, poets, printers, courtiers, and choir masters refashioned a Western religious convention that was approximately one thousand years old at the time when they made their claims upon it. Miserere Mei tries to get at both how (or in what specific forms) and why (or to what ends) they might have done so.

The ensuing sections lay down the necessary foundations for this investigation. First I look into the original selection of the seven Penitential Psalms from the Psalter, while also tackling the issue of the genre of these prayers from a form-critical viewpoint. Then I explain the significance of Augustinian hermeneutical practices to the establishment and maintenance of the series. Next I delineate the various liturgical and devotional purposes to which the seven psalms were put in the centuries between the patristic era and the Reformation. Finally, I provide an outline of Miserere Mei as a whole and address further some of the ways in which this project might contribute to current scholarship.

On the Origins of a Genre

The origins of the Penitential Psalms—when the grouping came about, who instigated it, and why—cannot be pinned down with absolute certainty. In the late Middle Ages one custom held that the seven
Penitential Psalms were selected out of the Psalter by Saint Augustine. This belief, which is almost certainly erroneous, likely resulted from a provocative statement in a short fifth-century *Vita (Life)* of Augustine by Possidius, bishop of Calama. Possidius writes of Augustine that in the days of his final illness he had “the Davidic Psalms, the few that were written about penitence, transcribed for his benefit” and placed on the wall opposite him so that, lying in bed, he would gaze upon them and weep “copiously and continually.” The problem for literary historians is that while Possidius indicates that Augustine recognized certain psalms as exceptionally effective for penitential purposes, he does not specify which psalms these were, or even how many of them Augustine picked out. Moreover, there is no evidence from any of Augustine’s own writings—not even from his extensive expositions of the psalms themselves—that the bishop of Hippo ever considered the seven Penitential Psalms of later tradition to function as a group.

Though the Penitential Psalms were probably not selected out of the Book of Psalms by Augustine, the genesis of the series may nonetheless have been motivated by the saint’s deathbed contrition, especially as it is narrated by Possidius: for the consolidation of the sequence of seven texts seems to have occurred in the century or so immediately following Augustine’s death (which occurred in the year 430). While it is fairly common for early patristic commentators to class specific psalms, and particularly Psalm 50, as penitential in nature, the first explicit reference to the seven Penitential Psalms as a set appears in Cassiodorus’s mid-sixth-century *Expositio Psalmorum (Explanation of the Psalms)*. In this treatise Cassiodorus provides an exposition of every psalm in the Book of Psalms. But, as he proceeds, he makes a point of highlighting each of “the penitents’ psalms,” while also delineating several thematic connections between them. Moreover, on two separate occasions he provides a complete list of the Penitential Psalms. At the beginning of his commentary on Psalm 6, Cassiodorus invites his audience to “remember” that this text is “the first of the penitents’ psalms” and gives the numbers for the remaining psalms in the group. He then itemizes all seven of the Penitential Psalms again at the end of his commentary on Psalm 142, where he notes that with this psalm—the last in the sequence—“the affliction of the suppliants and the course of their blessed tears are brought to a close.”
Given such unambiguous statements, it is tempting to point to Cassiodorus as the inaugurator of the grouping; but because the theologian expects his audience to recall an established tradition, it would appear instead that the seven psalms must have been associated with penitence for some time prior to the composition of his commentary. Regarding the question of beginnings, then, the conclusions of modern scholarship are necessarily limited. It seems reasonable to assume that the Penitential Psalms were selected out of the Book of Psalms at some point between Possidius’s *Vita of Augustine* and Cassiodorus’s *Expositio Psalmorum*—that is, between the middle of the fifth and the middle of the sixth century. But the precise moment of origin, and the identity of the originator (or, perhaps, originators), cannot be established with certainty.

Unlike the fifteen Gradual Psalms (the other significant subset of the Book of Psalms), the seven Penitential Psalms do not constitute a consecutive series in the Psalter. What, then, do they have in common? Why were they grouped together in the fifth or sixth century? And what has held them together from that time until today? These questions are not as easy to answer as one might imagine, largely because, while they are in essence questions about genre, they cannot be answered satisfactorily by pointing to the inherent formal qualities of the seven psalms alone.

In fact, ever since the establishment of modern biblical form criticism by Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel in the first decades of the twentieth century, it has been evident that the coherence of the sequence of the Penitential Psalms relies only *in part* on the intrinsic formal characteristics (such as theme, structure, tone, or affective technique) of the seven individual prayers. Although the principal goal of form criticism in relation to the Psalter was always to uncover the ways in which different types of psalms were deployed in the worship of ancient Israel, Gunkel and Mowinckel (and their colleagues) advanced their project initially by privileging formalist over historicist methods of analysis. And in taking this approach, they came not only to uncover some significant structural variation among the seven psalms traditionally grouped together as the “Penitential Psalms” but also to challenge the designation of “penitential” for a number of the texts in the series.
From a form-critical perspective, the seven Penitential Psalms all differ from one another in several ways. The most obvious odd man out, however, is Psalm 31. Written largely, though not completely, in the past tense, this psalm gives an account of a spiritual conversion. The psalmist (or “speaker” of the psalm) explains that once, when he found himself terribly troubled (he was groaning so much that his bones started to waste away), he acknowledged his sin and received divine forgiveness. Now he rejoices in his absolution and, somewhat didactically, urges others to follow his example—both by pursuing righteousness for themselves and by joining him in praise of the God who delivered him. While this psalm certainly foregrounds the theme of penitence, form-critical analysis suggests that in ancient Israel it would likely have been considered either a psalm of thanksgiving or a psalm of wisdom—or a combination of both.

In contrast to Psalm 31, the six remaining psalms in the sequence are composed predominantly in the present tense. These are not particularly happy psalms. Indeed, the psalmist protests about, and begs for respite from, a host of unbearable hardships. Not only does he suffer from a wide range of physical problems (sickness, weakness, weariness, disability, or old age), but he is also burdened with emotional distress (he bows low with mourning or succumbs to fits of weeping) and is subject to one or another kind of social alienation (his closest friends and relations have abandoned him and/or he finds himself surrounded by his worst enemies). Modern form-critical scholars generally concur that these prayers would have been understood, in the setting of early Israelite worship, primarily as individual psalms of lament.

But the degree to which any of these petitions for divine aid would have been comprehended not just as a psalm of lament but also as a psalm of penitence depends upon the degree to which the psalmist first rationalizes his abject circumstances as the result of his own iniquity and then attempts to do something about it. In form-critical terms, it depends upon how much of the psalmist’s complaint is also a confession, a plea for forgiveness, or an expression of a desire to turn from wickedness to righteousness. And the psalms of lament are far from consistent in this regard. Indeed, on the basis of these criteria, one might imagine the six laments as lying along a continuum, with Psalms 50 and 37 at one end (highly penitential), Psalms 6 and 101 at the other.

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In those laments at the “highly penitential” end of the scale, the psalmist not only posits a direct connection between his misfortune and his sin but also explicitly confesses his iniquity and expresses a longing to make amends and/or to receive God’s forgiveness. Psalm 37 exemplifies this tendency. Here the psalmist draws a triangular association between his physical pain, his transgressions, and God’s anger: “There is no health in my flesh because of thy wrath: there is no peace for my bones, because of my sins.” Thus, while he complains about his wretched condition, he also intimates that he might actually deserve to suffer. Later in the psalm, he even announces an intention to own up to his sin and receive punishment for it: “For I am ready for scourges: and my sorrow is continually before me. For I will declare my iniquity: and I will think for my sin.”

In those psalms at the “barely penitential” end of the scale, however, the psalmist does not attempt to explain his dire situation by reference to a theology of divine retribution. When, in Psalm 101, for instance, he complains that he has been left to wither away, alone and surrounded by his foes, he fails to admit to any iniquity on his own part. He does indicate that he is subject to the full force of God’s wrath. But he makes no suggestion to the effect that this bitter treatment is justified. Instead, he gets close to accusing the divinity of handling him in an arbitrary fashion, exalting him one minute and abandoning him the next: “For I did eat ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping,” he laments, adding, “Because of thy anger and indignation: for having lifted me up thou hast thrown me down.” This psalm, then, leaves open the rather terrifying possibility that the psalmist suffers at the indiscriminate (or, at least, the inscrutable) whim of the divine.

In sum, an analysis of the seven Penitential Psalms based on form-critical methods unearths the rather uneven, perhaps even inorganic quality of the grouping. Such an analysis, that is, does a very good job of underscoring that these psalms may never have been held together by a common emphasis on sin, confession, or repentance. What form criticism fails to explain, though, is precisely how, given their unequally penitential status (in formal terms, and thus also in the worship of ancient Israel), these seven psalms became and remained so thoroughly...
Penitential Hermeneutics

It is my contention that a great labor of imagination (theological and liturgical, literary and artistic) went into the construction and preservation of these seven psalms as a coherent sequence with a focus on penitence. In late medieval and early modern England that labor manifested itself, by and large, in the many different forms taken by the seven psalms—the focus of this book. Yet it actually began much earlier, with the commentaries of the church fathers. Of primary interest here is Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (*Expositions on the Book of Psalms*) (ca. 392-420), which provided the cornerstone for almost all thought about the psalms (in general) in the Western Middle Ages. As I have already mentioned, there is no evidence that Augustine ever considered the seven Penitential Psalms to represent a special subcategory within the Psalter. However, Augustine certainly exercised what I will call *penitential hermeneutics* on these texts. And this interpretive approach was adopted later by commentators who inherited the seven Penitential Psalms as an established sequence.

What I mean by *penitential hermeneutics* is a relatively systematic reading practice that foregrounds the concept of God’s wrathful (and simultaneously righteous) judgment and consequently interprets the psalmist’s multiple afflictions (such as his sickness and his suffering at the hands of his enemies) in an almost wholly spiritual light. Of the seven Penitential Psalms, three make specific mention of God’s anger (*ira* in Latin), while the remaining four make some kind of allusion, either explicit or implicit, to God’s justice. And, as Lynn Staley has observed, in the commentaries on the Penitential Psalms this theme becomes the dominant exegetical frame for the sequence. In other words, the Augustinian tradition characteristically positions the Penitential Psalms in the context of the inevitable moment when God will bring his perfectly just, yet utterly intimidating, sentence to bear upon mankind, separating (as the Gospel of Matthew puts it) the sheep from...
the goats, sending the upright to eternal bliss and the wicked to everlasting punishment.\textsuperscript{26}

The opening verse of the first Penitential Psalm reads: “O Lord, rebuke me not in thy indignation, nor chastise me in thy wrath.”\textsuperscript{27} Staley contends that the governing verbs in this petition—\textit{arguas} (reprove) and \textit{corripias} (chasten)—immediately place the psalmist “within a judicial and accusatory setting.”\textsuperscript{28} But I would suggest that this is not really the case for Psalm 6 itself, since the prayer incorporates no statement at all regarding the guilt (or innocence, for that matter) of the psalmist. Rather, it is only by virtue of penitential hermeneutics that the verbs in the psalm’s first verse take on a judicial valence.\textsuperscript{29}

A little bizarrely, Augustine comes close to pointing out this incongruity himself. He begins his commentary on Psalm 6 by meditating on the Day of Judgment—the day when, he asserts, all of humanity will face the severity of God’s justice. But he also notes that there is a gap of sorts between his own judicial interpretation and the language of the psalm: the term \textit{corripias}, which “avalleth toward amendment,” he argues, seems to be “rather too mild a word”; indeed, the psalmist’s use of this verb is peculiar, he suggests, because “for him who is reproved, that is, accused, it is to be feared lest his end be condemnation.”\textsuperscript{30} As far as Augustine is concerned, then, \textit{corripias} does not fit very well with the presumed setting of the Day of Judgment, when damnation ought to be near at hand. Thus, even while Augustine situates Psalm 6 within a thoroughly eschatological context, he simultaneously admits that the opening verse is not actually as terrifying as his interpretation, or his interpretive approach, requires it to be.

Later exegetists follow Augustine in accentuating the wrath of divine justice in their readings of the Penitential Psalms. In fact, Augustine’s successor Cassiodorus, who interprets the Book of Psalms largely as a rhetorical handbook, extends the Augustinian emphasis on God’s judgment to the entire series. Explaining, in the conclusion to his commentary on Psalm 6, why it is important to pay attention to all seven of the psalms in the sequence, he remarks: “They form a sort of judicial genre, in which the defendant appears before the sight of the Judge, atoning for his sin with tears, and dissolving it by confessing it.”\textsuperscript{31} Vernacular commentators also reiterate the Augustinian emphasis on God’s juridical ire. The fifteenth-century translator Dame Eleanor
Hull, for example, echoes Augustine closely in her Middle English rendition of an Old French commentary on the Penitential Psalms. She elucidates the first verse of Psalm 6 by arguing that the psalmist intends to distinguish himself from those who are most likely to be damned “by ryght” at the final doom and goes on to define this unfortunate crowd as all who “repentyd them not of ther synnys that were oryble” and “toke no penaunce”; it is these folk, she writes, who shall “goo in-to the fyre of helle, in-to the derke and oryble pryson of helle.”

It should be underscored that although the Penitential Psalms do not, in and of themselves, provide a consistent explanation for the numerous afflictions of the psalmist, Augustinian penitential hermeneutics does. For whenever the seven psalms are interpreted by reference to the specter of God’s wrathful judgment, the psalmist’s physical troubles are—almost by logical necessity—represented as (on the one hand) a direct symptom of iniquity or (on the other hand) a severe warning designed by God to inspire contrition on the part of the sinner. And this is the case even for those laments in which the psalmist makes no mention of sin at all (Psalms 6 and 101).

For Augustine, reading suffering as sin in the psalms is an extended exercise in denying the literal in favor of the allegorical, or, to put it another way, in subordinating the body to the soul. In the Enarrationes, that is, the psalmist’s physical agony is taken repeatedly as a manifestation of a tormented soul, spirit, or psyche (the key term in Latin is anima) overburdened, in the face of God’s anger, by a recognition of its own wretched sinfulness.

Consider, for a moment, Augustine’s elucidation of Psalm 6:3–4. In these verses, the psalmist asks God for help in his time of need: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak: heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled. And my soul is sore troubled exceedingly: but thou, O Lord, how long?” Here the psalmist complains that he is extremely unwell, both physically and spiritually, and asks God why relief is taking so long to arrive. But he gives no reason for his wretchedness. Augustine, on the other hand, infers a root cause for the problem from the first verse of the psalm (quoted above). Taking the notion of God’s indignation from the opening of Psalm 6 as the primary frame for the psalmist’s sickness, Augustine argues that the tormented, suffering psalmist is actually subject to a divine plan. The psalmist’s bones and
soul, he contends, are one and the same, for the bones are intended to be a figure for the soul.\textsuperscript{35} And he goes on to intimate that the text provides a picture of “a soul struggling with her diseases” while her physician tarryes, in order that she (the soul) “may be convinced what evils she has plunged herself into through sin.”\textsuperscript{36} Augustine makes at least three rather surprising hermeneutical moves here. First, he suggests that physical suffering is \textit{in essence} spiritual suffering—that the psalmist’s bodily pain is merely an allegory for a sick soul. Second, he argues that God does not simply \textit{allow} the psalmist to experience suffering but actually \textit{contributes} to the extent of his misery by deliberately tarrying in offering aid. And third, he posits that this delay is an act not of retribution but of mercy: for it is only through prolonged abjection that the psalmist will learn to examine himself thoroughly and thus recognize the gravity of his wickedness.

Writing largely under the influence (both direct and indirect) of Augustine, Eleanor Hull also interprets the physical suffering of the psalmist in relation to the condition of his spirit. And, like Augustine, she conflates bones and soul, paraphrasing the request for divine aid in Psalm 6:3–4 as follows:

\begin{quote}
I [haue] grete nede that ye haue mercy on me for I am ful syke for al my body ys so [foul] spottyd with dedly venym of my synnys that the rotynnes of corupcyon ys dyscendyd into the marow of my bonys. . . . I am so pore and feble that I may not ner dar not suffre thy iustyce, as he that ys not lytyl syke; and truly I feyne not for my syknes schewyht hym to the for he hathe now towchyd my bonys, . . . that ys, the strenght of my soule and that gretly.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Hull understands physical sickness not merely as an allegorical \textit{figure for} but also as a literal \textit{result of} a troubled spirit. Nevertheless, she explains the distress of the psalmist by underscoring the inner turbulence of his soul as he stands before—and contemplates—the fierce and impending judgment of God.

While Augustine and those who follow him repeatedly comprehend the psalmist’s pain as a symptom of his iniquity, they also interpret the psalmist’s adversaries as various forms of temptation. And this tendency again constitutes a denial of the literal (or bodily) and an
exaltation of the allegorical (or spiritual). The interpretive custom regarding the psalmist’s complaint about his enemies in a further passage from Psalm 6 is a case in point. In the biblical text the psalmist protests, somewhat crossly, that he is surrounded by those who mean him harm. “I have grown old amongst all my enemies,” he cries, before addressing his antagonists directly: “Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity: for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping.”\textsuperscript{38} There is nothing in the psalm to suggest that these adversaries are meant to be taken as anything other than literal figures. But the exegetical tradition derived from Augustine turns to allegoresis to understand them.

In Augustine’s opinion, when the psalmist laments that he is among his enemies, he means either that he is beleaguered by his own most grievous “vices” or that he is surrounded by those men who “will not be converted to God” and who therefore do whatever they can to “draw the others [those who \textit{have} been converted] into punishment with them.”\textsuperscript{39} Augustine’s view is adopted and modified by Cassiodorus, who suggests that the psalmist is bothered either by “diabolical spirits” or by “our sins”: these agents of evil, Cassiodorus asserts, are rightly called “inimical” because “they lead souls into hell and continue with their deadly enticements even today.”\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, in a series of sermons on the Penitential Psalms dating from the early sixteenth century, John Fisher defines the “enemies” of the psalmist as “the fleshe, the worlde, \& the deuylles,” and the “workers of iniquity” as “the doers of wyckednes . . . whiche besyeth themselfe \& be about to cause synnes to be done” (EW 20). Within penitential hermeneutics, then, the threat of real physical violence embodied in the psalmist’s literal or bodily foes is altered into a purely spiritual danger—that of the provocation to abjure righteousness.\textsuperscript{41}

The total effect of this patristic and medieval habit of interpretation (penitential hermeneutics) is that it unites seven somewhat disparate psalms into a largely uniform or cohesive series. Indeed, the Augustinian understanding of the problem of suffering in the Penitential Psalms—an understanding that construes the psalmist’s pain as the direct result of a juridical confrontation between God’s wrath and human sin—essentially smooths out the many variations in the sequence. To be even more direct: when the psalmist’s abjection is viewed as a symptom of his iniquity, and when his enemies are read as agents of tempta-
tion, the seven separate psalms are all but transformed into one long and unbroken prayer of confession.42

It is also worth noting here that this particular hermeneutical practice finds a direct counterpart in the material culture of the period discussed in this study. To read the Penitential Psalms today, one generally has to locate each psalm individually in the Book of Psalms. But this was not typically the case in the late medieval and early modern age, when the seven psalms often circulated together (but apart from the Psalter) as a single textual unit—referred to in England, for instance, as “the booke of the vii. Psalmes” or even “the Psalme of a penitent sinner.”43 Presumably, such material embodiments of the unified nature of the sequence had the effect of fostering certain metonymic or synecdochic modes of interpretation: any particular psalm in the series might be explicated by association with any other psalm, or by reference to the greater whole.

Doing Penance and Praying for the Dead

In addition to employing penitential hermeneutics when reading the seven psalms, theologians and preachers publicized the vital role of these prayers within religious practice—and this advocacy further confirmed both the coherence and the penitential focus of the series. In fact, from the very beginning exegetes insisted that all seven of the psalms could be of great use or great profit in the pursuit of divine clemency. This kind of argument is evident as early as Cassiodorus’s *Expositio Psalmorum*. Opening his exposition of Psalm 6, for example, Cassiodorus pauses to comment on the entire set of “penitents’ psalms”: “Do not believe that there is no significance in this aggregate of seven,” he states, “because our forbears said that our sins could be forgiven in seven ways: first by baptism, second by suffering martyrdom, third by almsgiving, fourth by forgiving the sins of our brethren, fifth by diverting a sinner from the error of his ways, sixth by abundance of charity, and seventh by repentance.”44 Here Cassiodorus draws a rather enigmatic connection between the Penitential Psalms and the methods deployed traditionally by repentant sinners to attain forgiveness.45 Clearly the two sets involved in the analogy (“the penitents’ psalms” and the
standard means of gaining absolution) are linked by their both being composed of seven elements. But they appear to have more in common than simply a particular sacred number. Indeed, the point of Cassiodorus’s comparison seems to be that the seven psalms may be just as valuable, just as effective, as any of the seven long-established methods of securing God’s pardon, such as being baptized or suffering martyrdom. What Cassiodorus emphasizes, then, is the function of the psalms: they are penitential, as a group of seven prayers, because they provide a useful way for penitents to find grace.

In accord with patristic theological suggestions like Cassiodorus’s about the high functional worth of the Penitential Psalms, the church in the West quickly put these seven biblical prayers to use. Indeed, this sequence of psalms was considered an indispensable aid not just to practicing penitence—in all of its manifold varieties—but also to praying for the souls of the dead. In this section, I will thus briefly outline the complex relationship between the seven psalms and the penitential and mortuary rites of the medieval church.

It would be misleading to characterize ecclesiastical penance (or penitence) in the Latin Middle Ages as a static or homogeneous tradition. In truth, between the time of the church fathers and that of the Reformation—a period of approximately one thousand years—the church theorized and practiced penance in a multiplicity of ways. Yet what is most noteworthy as far as this current project is concerned is that however (and by whomever) penance was undertaken in the West, the Penitential Psalms were almost always woven into its procedures.

Perhaps the most recurrent use of the Penitential Psalms in association with repentance was by members of the religious orders. Throughout the Middle Ages, indeed, the seven psalms were repeated frequently by the religious as a solemn penitential devotion. This was particularly the case during the time of fasting and self-reflection leading up to Easter every year, though the act of praying the Penitential Psalms in repentance was by no means confined to the Lenten season. Whereas the papal court tradition and the Franciscan books prescribed the Penitential Psalms with the Litany as a penance on ferial days in Lent, other traditions extended the practice to include festival days as well, and some communities stipulated the recitation of the Penitential Psalms even beyond the Lenten period.
(Monastic Agreement), which dates from about 970 and provides a snapshot of monastic practices in England in the second half of the tenth century, suggests that in the majority of English monasteries at that time the Penitential Psalms were said year-round. The sequence was recited with the Litany after the hour of Prime on ferial days in both winter and summer, while also providing the basis for an important version of the trina oratio, or threefold prayer, itself repeated at three points in the day. During Lent, the seven psalms took an even more prominent role in daily worship: at each of the canonical hours (except Nocturns), the monks lay prostrate on the floor of the oratory to recite one of the Penitential Psalms and one of the Gradual Psalms.\footnote{50} In addition, the series was said on Good Friday, as a penitential devotion in honor of the holy cross.\footnote{51}

While the seven psalms held a central place in the divine worship of the religious orders, they also played a crucial part in the penitential rituals of the laity. Indeed, by the time that the Regularis concordia was produced in England, the Penitential Psalms had already been incorporated, at least on the European continent, into the practice of public penance. This penitential process first took shape in the second and third centuries and remained the predominant means of penance until about the sixth century. In the ninth and tenth centuries it was reinstated in a revised form, predominantly in Frankish lands, as a means of handling exceptionally serious sins. According to the Carolingian version of the procedure, repentant sinners were expected to undergo a rite of excommunication (involving the imposition of ashes and a hair shirt), renounce sin, perform penitential exercises in public, and then be formally reinstated into the community of the faithful.\footnote{52}

The earliest indication of the way in which the Penitential Psalms were used in canonical public penance appears in Libri duo de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis (Two Books Concerning Synodical Cases and Church Discipline), a collection of conciliar canons compiled around 906 by Regino, abbot of Prüm. One of the canons anthologized by Regino suggests that the seven psalms were read aloud during the dramatic and severe ritual of excommunication, which took place on Ash Wednesday.\footnote{53} According to the canon, all sinners who were to embark on public penance at the beginning of Lent had to present themselves to the bishop at the doors of the church, barefoot and wearing only
sackcloth. Having enjoined penance “according to the measure of [each penitent’s] guilt,” the bishop led them all “into the church and, prostrate upon the floor . . ., chant[ed] with tears, together with all the clergy, the seven penitential psalms, for their absolution.”55 Finally, the bishop concluded the ritual by imposing ashes on the penitents and casting them out of the church.56

Regino’s canon had a significant impact on Ash Wednesday liturgies across Europe in the Carolingian period and beyond, largely because it was included in the Ash Wednesday rite in an influential Romano-Germanic pontifical composed in Mainz between 950 and 963 and copied by both Burchard of Worms and Johannes Gratian.57 But it does not represent the only way that the laity interacted with the Penitential Psalms in the Middle Ages. In fact, the Penitential Psalms were said regularly at public mass from at least the beginning of the thirteenth century, when Pope Innocent III (papacy 1198–1216) stipulated that they were to be prayed liturgically on all Lenten ferial days.58

Additionally, and more significantly for the purposes of this book, as soon as penance was established as a sacrament, the Penitential Psalms were integrated in its rituals.

Penance was included by theologians among the seven sacraments of the Western Church from the twelfth century, and by the thirteenth century it had made its way into official ecclesiastical documents.59 As a sacrament, it played a central role in late medieval parish life, not only because it conferred divine grace upon its participants, but also because it assisted them in their efforts to avoid eternal damnation and to reduce the number of years that they would have to spend in purgatory.60 It almost always comprised three essential elements: contritio cordis (contrition of the heart, or repentance), confessio oris (auricular confession, usually to a priest), and satisfactio operis (works of satisfaction, or penitential exercises). The structure of the sacrament was based on a private penitential procedure, known as the tariff system, that first emerged among Irish monks as early as the sixth century. According to this Celtic practice, the penitent revealed his sins individually to a confessor, who imposed penitential exercises designed to atone for the particular kind of offenses he had committed. In the seventh century, the tariff system began to spread to the Continent, where it soon gained popularity and eventually took precedence over canonical public penance.61
For the laity, the sacrament of penance was especially affiliated with Lent, which, by the later Middle Ages, had come to be understood as a season of repentance not just for penitents or those in the religious orders but for every member of the church. The connection between repentance and Lent was advanced significantly by the twenty-first canon of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which famously declares:

All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them. Let them reverently receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter unless they think, for a good reason and on the advice of their own priest, that they should abstain from receiving it for a time. Otherwise they shall be barred from entering a church during their lifetime and they shall be denied a Christian burial at death.

Because parishioners were expected (on pain of excommunication) not only to confess to a priest at least once per year but also to be ready to receive the sacrament of the altar on Easter Day, the period of Lent steadily became the natural time for the completion of their works of satisfaction.

The Penitential Psalms were linked to the sacrament of penance in two distinct yet related ways. First, priests prescribed the recitation of the Penitential Psalms as a work of satisfaction for specific sins. Second, since most parishioners confessed to a priest and received absolution infrequently—perhaps no more than the once per year required of them by Lateran IV, if that—they often turned privately to the Penitential Psalms in the meantime as a way to deal with their everyday transgressions. To put it another way, late medieval parishioners were allowed a surprising degree of spiritual self-management in penitential matters; by reciting the seven psalms, they could maintain the purity of their souls before God without needing frequent ecclesiastical mediation. Moreover, praying the Penitential Psalms helped them not only to obtain forgiveness for the sins they had committed but also to avoid committing further sins, and thus, perhaps, to avoid having to confess to a...
Besides being linked to penance (for both the religious and the lay), the Penitential Psalms were often said as intercessory prayers, or suffrages, for the souls of the dead. There is evidence that the Penitential Psalms were used by the religious orders as suffrages for the deceased as early as the eighth century, and by the late Middle Ages they were included in lay folks’ primers as part of an established sequence of such prayers. Comprising the Penitential Psalms, the Litany, the Office for the Dead (the Placebo and Dirige), and the Commendations (plus, on occasion, the Psalms of the Passion), the sequence as a whole was recited both to shorten the period that the dead would have to spend in purgatory and to help them endure their suffering while they remained there.

Within this intercessory sequence, the Penitential Psalms, the Litany, and the Placebo and Dirige would have been particularly familiar to the laity, since they were used in church, in the votive masses that followed a death. Many testators specified that these suffrages, and especially the sixth Penitential Psalm (Psalm 129, the De profundis), were to be recited in one or another combination for their own souls—usually by the poor, to whom they left funds for the service. Some parishioners may even have paid for these psalms to be said on their behalf before they died. Thus in the famous apologia of the C-text of Piers Plowman, the fourteenth-century poet William Langland, or at least his fictional alter ego, included these supplications among the tools of his trade:

And so y leue yn London and opelond bothe;
The lomes [tools] that y labore with and lyflode deserue
Is pater-noster and my prymer, placebo and dirige,
And my sauter som tyme and my seuene psalmes.
This y segge for here soules of suche as me helpeth,
And tho that fynden me my fode fouchen-saf, y trowe,
To be welcome whanne y comme, other-while in a monthe,
Now with hym, and now with here; on this wyse y begge
Withoute bagge or botel but my wombe one [my stomach alone].

It would appear that Langland’s ability to earn his keep (as a chantry clerk, perhaps) was based on a widespread belief that the repetition of a
short series of prayers—a series that included the “seuene psalmes” (i.e., the Penitential Psalms)—was efficacious in easing the passage of the dead through purgatory. The same belief is also reflected in the Middle English poem *The Gast of Gy*, with additional emphasis on the Penitential Psalms. As Eamon Duffy points out, while the entire Office for the Dead is lauded in the poem, the Penitential Psalms and the Litany are said to be “the devoutist orisouns to the soulis in purgatory” because the seven psalms cancel out the Seven Deadly Sins.

To summarize, then, in the latter years of the Middle Ages the Penitential Psalms played several key roles in day-to-day lay piety: they were recited to fulfill the third element of the sacrament of penance (works of satisfaction), to counter past and future sins in the interim between confessions, and to relieve the purgatorial suffering of the souls of the deceased.

Of course, since the Penitential Psalms were so closely associated with both penance and suffrages in the late Middle Ages, it was almost inevitable that they should become entangled in Reformation debate. In the sixteenth century, both the sacrament of penance and prayers for the dead came under intense scrutiny by reformers, who eventually dismissed them (along with the entire devotional structure relating to purgatory and good works) as superstitious rites. From the perspective of early modern evangelicalism, therefore, the Penitential Psalms no longer possessed any sacramental or liturgical justification.

Yet, as I have indicated above, this sequence of seven texts, which had been connected to the rituals of the Latin Church for so many centuries, was not discarded from (or even downplayed in) evangelical culture—not immediately, at any rate. To be sure, the seven psalms were included in the canonical Scriptures that were valued so highly by the reformers. However, since these psalms were not found *together* in the Bible, and since the sequence as a whole was associated with several forms of religious practice that came to be viewed with great suspicion, it might have seemed natural to the reformers to disregard the grouping. But the earliest evangelicals did just the opposite. Favoring a strategy of subtle appropriation over outright rejection, the reformers turned quickly to the Penitential Psalms to develop their own theories of repentance, as well as to intervene in larger doctrinal debates about the relative worth of good works and divine grace in effecting salvation.
Overview of *Miserere Mei*

While the Penitential Psalms became a key site for doctrinal dispute in the Reformation, they continued to play a significant part in English devotional life. Furthermore, they were used increasingly in contexts beyond those that had been established for them by the medieval church. The chapters of my book thus constitute a series of interdisciplinary case studies, each one seeking to investigate a different material or generic recasting of the psalm texts. Beginning with an exploration of manuscript and print illustration, I move on to consider theological commentary, verse paraphrase, lyric poetry, political polemic, and devotional song.

Although my own training has been in literary studies, I have found this interdisciplinary structure to be absolutely necessary, since the literary impact of the Penitential Psalms in the late medieval and early modern period was achieved not in isolation but rather in collaboration with numerous other forms of communication—artistic, homiletic, liturgical, political, and so on. Throughout this project, though, my approach is to merge the tools of close analysis with the methods of the history of the material text. I examine what happened to the Penitential Psalms by investigating how the poetics of penance intersected with the making, marketing, and reading of books. And I suggest that while the Penitential Psalms at times served as a locus of conflict between adherents to the traditional faith and followers of the new religion, they also functioned as an important devotional and lyric resource that was able to migrate over the confessional divide with surprising ease.

In chapter 1 I examine the illustrations that accompanied the Penitential Psalms in late medieval and early modern Books of Hours. I note that in the early *Horae* the seven psalms are typically glossed with a depiction of David repenting for his sins, but from the late fifteenth century this image is customarily replaced with a representation of David spying on Bathsheba. Both motifs, I argue, provide a consistent penitential context for the seven psalms. But they also have different emphases: while the early illustrations encourage imitation of David’s legendary penance, the later images participate in a reorganization of confessional practice around sexual concerns. I end the chapter by con-
sidering the afterlife of the image of David and Bathsheba. This subject, I point out, rapidly traveled from Books of Hours into a variety of devotional, catechetical, and educational texts. It even crossed the Atlantic to colonial America, where, in The New England Primer, it was used to teach children how to read. These details, I contend, call attention to a startling interplay of pre- and post-Reformation art forms.

My second chapter considers two theological commentaries on the Penitential Psalms dating from the early sixteenth century: This treatise concernynge the fruytfull saynges of Davyd in the seuen penytencyall psalmes, composed in about 1504 by John Fisher, and Martin Luther’s Die sieben Bußpsalmen (The Seven Penitential Psalms), written in 1517 and revised in 1525. Reading these overlapping yet divergent expositions alongside one another, I demonstrate how the Penitential Psalms became central to Reformation controversy. Fisher employs the seven psalms to justify and promote the penitential systems of the orthodox church, including the sacrament of penance and prayers for the dead. Luther, on the other hand, takes the opportunity not only to query the theological foundations upon which those systems were originally constructed but also to propose a radical revision of the church’s understanding of repentance. This chapter thus reveals that the key concerns of Reformation-era debate—concerns about justification and sanctification, about human suffering and divine grace—were addressed through, and at times even inspired by, the very medium of the Penitential Psalms.

Chapter 3 explores the writing and printing of Sir Thomas Wyatt’s mid-sixteenth-century verse paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms in the context of emerging attitudes toward penance. I begin by asking what kind of work Wyatt’s rendition of the Penitential Psalms might have accomplished in Reformation England, and I note that the first printed edition was sponsored by a number of radical reformers. I then turn to the poetry itself to understand why it would have been of interest to evangelicals of the time. In this latter inquiry, I employ Roland Greene’s phenomenological schema of ritual and fictional modes of apprehension to contrast Wyatt’s poem with other options that might have been available to its publishers (metrical paraphrases of the Penitential Psalms by Richard Maidstone, Thomas Brampton, and John Croke). Subsequently, I argue that Wyatt’s fictionalizing reading of the Penitential Psalms manipulates the widespread late medieval belief
(embodied, for instance, in the tale of David included in Caxton's *Golden Legend* of 1483) that David did penance for his sins in a wholly exemplary manner. In Wyatt’s narrative prologues, as well as in the dialogue that develops between the prologues and the psalms, David converts not merely from sinner to saint but also from conservative (or orthodox) to evangelical penitent. Thus Wyatt’s paraphrase extends the polemical thrust of Luther’s *Die sieben Bußpsalmen*, redefining the nature of penance for its English audiences.

In my fourth chapter I investigate some of the renderings of the Penitential Psalms from the second half of the sixteenth century that were designed to be used in new ritual contexts. For although it was popular in the period to fictionalize the Penitential Psalms, attaching them (as Wyatt’s paraphrase does) to the story of King David’s great sin and even greater repentance, it was also customary to adapt them for recitation by contemporary Christians. In other words, any believer, or any group of believers, could stake a claim on the Penitential Psalms. I pay particular attention to *Christian prayers and meditations* (1569), an anthology published by John Day for Queen Elizabeth’s personal use, as well as a 1582 English translation by John Stubbs of Theodore Beza’s *Christian meditations vpon eight Psalmes* (which includes an exposition of each of the seven Penitential Psalms along with a meditation on Psalm 1). These prayer books, I argue, adapt medieval liturgical uses of the Penitential Psalms for more social purposes, turning the seven psalms into instruments used both to sustain specific Reformed communities and to launch rhetorical attacks against the perceived antagonists of those communities.

My fifth and final chapter offers a series of reflections on the continued popularity of the Penitential Psalms in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Here my focus falls especially on the seven psalms as lyric poetry and song, and my goal is twofold: to uncover new, or modified, interpretations of the psalm sequence and to reveal an important return to traditional exegetical and liturgical practices. I begin by looking at the metrical psalm translations of George Gascoigne and Sir John Harington. In these works, I suggest, it is evident that by the end of the period covered by this study English poets had begun to experiment with the Penitential Psalms as vehicles for the expression not just of piety, or even of polemic, but also of personal
forms of politics. In the second half of the chapter, I turn my attention to Richard Verstegan’s *Odes. In imitation of the seaven penitential psalmes*—an adaptation into song, intended for English recusants. In several deliberate ways, I posit, this text calls upon the fundamental principles of penitential hermeneutics, enacting a reappropriation of the seven psalms for devotional purposes.

As the preceding chapter outline suggests, *Miserere Mei* examines the Penitential Psalms from a variety of different angles and offers a collection of open, exploratory, and intentionally experimental essays. This scheme is not meant to be encyclopedic. Neither is it intended to resolve everything that might be said about the Penitential Psalms into a single pithy or memorable thesis. Yet when the separate case studies of this book are read together a couple of consistent themes do emerge—and these should make a significant intervention in late medieval and early modern literary studies.

The impact of the Psalter as a whole on early English literature has resurfaced as a popular topic of late, especially, though not solely, in scholarship on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Along with several key articles by Anne Lake Prescott, Margaret P. Hannay, Carol V. Kaske, and others, the most valuable works in the area include Hannibal Hamlin’s *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (2004) and Beth Quitslund’s *The Reformation in Rhyme: Sternhold, Hopkins, and the English Metrical Psalter, 1547–1603* (2008). These recent investigations build on earlier foundational studies, such as Rivkah Zim’s *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer, 1535–1601* (1987) and M. P. Kuczynski’s *Prophetic Song: The Psalms as Moral Discourse in Late Medieval England* (1995).

The above-mentioned publications are together to be commended for their compelling investigations of the critical role played by the Psalter in the shaping of English literary and cultural history. Nevertheless, almost without exception, each of these studies focuses on the Book of Psalms in either the early modern or (in the case of Kuczynski) the late medieval era. And, as a consequence, our understanding of psalmic literature across the established period divide remains incomplete. *Miserere Mei* takes a different tack. Concentrating solely on the seven Penitential Psalms (which have received little scholarly attention

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on their own, as a subset of the Psalter), and using a transhistorical lens, this book contributes to the conversation in two specific ways.

First, it addresses what I take to be a current imbalance in early modern research. A great deal of recent work has focused on the sacrament of the Eucharist, representing it as both the foremost site of Reformation debate and the ritual holding the most symbolic weight in the sixteenth century. This scholarship, motivated in large part by an obsession in literary and cultural studies with the nature of metaphor, has certainly been both enlightening and provocative. Nevertheless, it has had the inadvertent effect of diverting notice away from other equally important sacramental issues. An examination of the debates about penance that emerged directly from rereadings and rewritings of the Penitential Psalms starts to reveal that at least as much as—and perhaps even more than—the Eucharist, penance played a vital role in the development of Reformation thinking. Indeed, because penance intersected with almost every aspect of the church’s theology and ecclesiology of reconciliation, when Luther attacked the sacrament he challenged the entire system of traditional soteriology.

Second, where current scholarship tends to suggest an insurmountable gulf between late medieval and early modern—or “Catholic” and “Protestant”—writing, my book highlights how the religious literature of the pre-Reformed past was not cast aside but rather gradually and complexly reshaped in Reformation England. It is often argued, implicitly if not explicitly, that the Reformation did away with medieval religious literary culture. Yet (as I have already begun to indicate) this study discloses that a substantial part of Reformation-era devotional and poetic consciousness was fashioned directly from what came before it. Indeed, to delve into the Penitential Psalms is to discover that they cross purported boundaries of historical epoch, of religious confession, and of literary form in unexpected and challenging ways: these seven prayers belong to both late medieval and early modern culture, to both pre- and post-Reformation piety, and to both devotional and polemical discourse. To date, the remarkable manner in which their influence transverses the period from the end of the fourteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth century has not yet been sufficiently recognized—a fact that this book aims to rectify.