

* *With Bryan Tarpley, Lead Software Developer for Initiative for Digital Humanities, Media, and Culture at Texas A&M University*

The Book of Common Prayer as Bible App

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 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 inherited 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 16th-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 “programmatic” nature of religious para-texts like the BCP.