DAVID AND JONATHAN IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw numerous retellings of the story of David, and his divinely appointed rise from shepherd to warrior leader under King Saul to king of Israel in his own right. Ted-Larry Pebworth has counted more than 100 such retellings in these two hundred years. However, David’s life received extensive treatment only in particular dramatic episodes: his victory over the giant Philistine, Goliath; his love of the married woman, Bathsheba, and his arrangement for the destruction of her warrior-husband, Uriah; and the attempted usurpation of David by his son Absalom, and Absalom’s subsequent death (97). Generally David becomes in the imaginative literature and religious writings of the period the divinely appointed king, the divinely inspired psalmist, and the emblem of fallen and repentant humanity (Frontain 12). In seventeenth-century puritan sermons, David becomes, moreover, an emblem of the ideal leader and soldier, since he encourages the Israelites to continue their martial preparedness even at the moment when he is mourning the deaths of Saul and Jonathan; in fact, he uses this personal and national tragedy to urge his Israelite warriors to renew their determination to win against their enemies and to avenge their fallen compatriots (Ahearn 107, 112). In contrast, the friendship between David and Jonathan, Saul’s son and heir, is little discussed, even though this relationship became proverbial for ideal friendship, offered as a Biblical parallel to that of the Greek and Latin classics (Pebworth 97). In England, this relationship figures largely in only five works. For selections from Abraham Cowley’s unfinished Biblical epic Davideis, see the print anthology, pp. 364-71, and for Thomas Ellwood’s identically titled epic, see the Online Companion.

Cowley and Ellwood fashion their retellings of the story of David very differently, and arguably only Cowley sees the friendship between the two as central to the Christian theme of his narrative: humanity’s general rejection of and need to cooperate with God’s divine plan (Pebworth 97, 102-103). In keeping with his desire to write a biblical epic “after the pattern of our master Virgil” (‘Preface,’ np), Cowley represents David and Jonathan in terms of martial and classical concepts of ideal friendship. David and Jonathan are equal in rank, in virtue, and in goals; the trust between the two is absolute, and neither undertakes the friendship with an eye to self-interest, each being instead willing to sacrifice everything for the other (Pebworth 99). In terms of Cicero’s enormously influential treatise on friendship, Laelius (see ‘Cicero,’ Online Companion), David and Jonathan achieve the ideal state of being “one soul in bodies twain,” but they also become embodiments of the Neoplatonic ascent from earthly to heavenly love, from the appreciation of physical beauty and human virtue to the love of virtue itself, and of God (Pebworth 100). The poet and essayist Lady Mary Chudleigh also employs these twinned discourses (see print anthology, pp. 415-20). However, while this ascent conventionally involves the casting off of all sensual and sexual desire for the beloved, Cowley’s powerful depiction of the love between David and Jonathan is infused with a deep homoeroticism, one that perhaps accounts paradoxically for the lack of comparisons between David and Jonathan and Achilles and Patroclus, whose status as erotic lovers was well-established by the time Cowley was writing. By the time Cowley was writing, moreover, David had become a byword for sexual licentiousness, given that the David-Bathsheba incident’s status as Biblical narrative was seized upon by writers interested in producing and justifying erotic poetry (Frontain 12). The lengthy descriptions of David’s erotic male beauty are ostensibly a sign of Neoplatonic spiritual excellence in Cowley, and of David’s links to the beautiful Ovidian heroes Leander and Adonis in Drayton [see print anthology, pp. 336-40] (Frontain 12, 14-16). In contrast, Ellwood’s epic eschews any physical description of David’s beauty, a marked departure from Cowley’s and Drayton’s earlier representations. Ellwood’s David is called a “sprightly youth” (Book 1, p. 16) just
after his declamation to Goliath; after his victory over the Giant he is the “nimble stripling,” but there is nothing like the lengthy descriptions of Cowley or Drayton.

**WORKS CITED AND SUGGESTED READING:**


MARIE H. LOUGHLIN